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SORCEROUS STABBER
ORPHEN
THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

3. REST WITHIN MY HEART, GHOST!





*"Don't come back to haunt me even if this kills you," Orphen muttered.
He extended his right hand towards her and yelled:
"I release thee, Sword of Light!"*





Hearing Orphen's yell, the mist shrieked out with a voice like nails on a chalkboard.
"YOU... aRe... PHONOGHOULOUS!
I've f!NaLly fOUnd yoU!"



Claiomh had hit him in the face
with a perfectly executed
roundhouse kick!

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Prologue

On a table at the back of an ordinary but empty bar, there sat a single file.

Information concerning the man known as Orphen.

The file itself was extremely thin, bordering on empty. The woman scanned the elegant handwriting on it and smirked a dangerous smirk — one that suited her blood-red lips rather well. She was rather young, given her trade; her appearance suggested that she was somewhere in her early twenties. She was extremely thin and almost looked like a common prostitute, were it not for the dangerously sharp glint in her eyes. She had long black hair all the way down to her waist, which almost seemed to blend in perfectly with the skin-tight black bodysuit she wore.

If one were to ask any number of random men on the street, they would all likely agree that she was a very attractive woman. But if one were to then ask those same men if they would like to go out with her, then most would have trouble even picturing the idea. She had the scent of danger clinging thickly to her.

The woman picked up the file from the table and flicked it open with one of her sharp fingernails, crossing her legs and leaning her elbow on the table as she did so. She cast a sidelong glance at the man who had passed her the file, and while the action itself seemed somewhat seductive, her sharp gaze pierced right through to the heart of the matter.

She opened her mouth and, in a husky voice, she said, “And what business might we have with this Orphen, *Mister Oswald?*”

The man called Oswald — a lean, gray-haired gentleman in his forties, clad in a white suit — jumped a little at hearing his own name spoken aloud. He turned to meet eyes with his bodyguard — a large man with a torso as thick as a tree trunk — before facing the woman once more and trying somewhat belatedly to act totally composed in front of her.

“How did you find out my name?” he asked.

The woman snorted. “If you’d like, I could trace out the blueprints for your home, tell you what time of day you usually go to the bathroom, or even reveal to you that your bodyguards play poker to decide who has to work what shifts for you. This is all information that anyone with some copper to spare could buy from one of any number of two-bit criminals loitering around the local back alleys.”

“I see,” said Oswald with a wave of his hand, “so *bluffing* is your forte now, is it?”

The woman paid his comment no mind. “Let’s get down to business, shall we? What does this job entail?”

“I’m sure you of all people know that there’s only one reason a man like myself would summon a woman in your trade from the other side of the Continent. Shall we both stop playing dumb now, Philietta?”

The woman — Philietta — raised one finger to her lips as she perused the file, and smiled to herself for reasons known only to her.

“Yes, let’s,” she said without any flair at all. Instead, she picked up the file and began reading aloud: “Orphen, a Black Sorcerer. No known surname. Presumed to be in his twenties. Unmarried, and never has been. No known relatives living or deceased, including parents. Not registered as a citizen in any town or city. There are reports that he comes from the Tower of Fangs, but the Continental Sorcerers’ Association, Damsels’ Orisons, claims that they’ve never heard of a Sorcerer by that name, and indeed, the name Orphen does not show up on any social registers relating to the Tower. Thus, he is unemployed. However...”

Philietta read this far before looking up to meet Oswald’s gaze, and changed her tone to a rather more teasing one.

“He is known to be engaged in illegal moneylending practices.”

“He’s a conman, and he’s running around doing business on *my* land. Such an insolent little man must be taught a lesson,” said Oswald, rubbing his suit cuffs to calm himself.

“In other words, there’s just a pesky little fly buzzing around in your room,”

giggled Philietta. “Is there any real need to squash such a harmless pest so violently?”

“It’s not about the man himself, it’s about *setting an example*. Besides, if you find one filthy insect in your home, it means there are already dozens more crawling around behind the walls.”

“Then I suppose the place must have already been full to bursting when *you* arrived, no?”

“Cocky bitch—” said Oswald’s bodyguard, rising from his seat presumably to ‘teach the woman a lesson.’ Oswald raised one hand, though, and the bodyguard froze in his steps.

“Don’t. I know it would be simple for you to break the poor lass like a twig, but then we would need to hire another exterminator to deal with our insect problem, and it’s not easy to find another cheap assassin on the level of Philietta the Fools’ Hound. I would very much like to avoid that hassle,” explained Oswald, turning elegantly back to the assassin in question. “Now then, Miss Philietta. I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to refrain from such banter around my witless subordinate. He’s eager to please me and quick to turn to violence in order to accomplish this, and I’m afraid that one day I might not be able to pull on his leash in time, if you get my drift.”

“Between one-sidedly beating up your little meathead friend over there and having to risk life and limb in a duel against a Black Sorcerer who may very well have come from the elite Tower of Fangs, I think I know which I’d rather avoid.”

Philietta grinned dangerously as though she were taunting Oswald into turning his bodyguard on her, but Oswald simply grinned in turn.

“You say that, but we both know fully well that you’ll take the job, won’t you? From what I’ve heard, the Fools’ Hound never turns down a job request.”

“Consider it done,” said Philietta, the Fools’ Hound.

Satisfied, Oswald sat down in his chair with a smile on his face, ignoring the cheap creaking noises of the flimsy chair and old floorboards beneath him.

“I must warn you, though,” said Oswald, “he’s a persistent little roach. I’ve already sent out a number of my men to warn him about his shady little

dealings, and to my surprise and disappointment, each and every one of them came back looking like they'd crawled out of a torture room."

"Oh my goodness, all those big tough garden-variety thugs, and they can't even hold their own against a single little Sorcerer boy? Why am I not surprised?" said Philietta, stealing a glance in the bodyguard's direction. The man stood rooted to the spot despite clearly seething with rage at the insult, but he made every effort not to even let this show on his face.

"Oh dear. How boring..." she sighed, disappointed from the bottom of her heart that she couldn't make an example of the meathead.

With the deal struck, she rose from her chair and turned towards the door before saying, "What about my reward?"

While Ostwald thought that she was probably asking how much her payment for the job would be, he deliberately replied as though he'd misunderstood to test her reaction. "You'll be paid when the job is finished," he said simply.

As expected, the woman didn't bother to follow up with 'how much?' which proved his suspicions.

Philietta the Fools' Hound wasn't working as a hired assassin for the money. She clearly had a different purpose driving her. Her true reasons for working as an assassin were something that Ostwald couldn't possibly know, nor did he particularly care to know, so long as she did her job.

Chapter I: The Fools Gather Round

At a certain time, in a certain place, a certain incident occurred which set everything into motion...

While this incident was happening, Majic was busy sneaking canned food out of the wagon. He sat down by the campfire and tapped the edge of the can with a can opener. There was no real meaning to this, it was just something he did out of habit before opening a food tin.

The writing on the label apparently said something about ingredients and cooking instructions, but Majic had never learned much on that topic, so it was all gibberish to his eyes. Since he couldn't read what was written on the tin, he just assumed that it was probably chunks of meat in some kind of sauce, since that's what came to mind when he thought of canned food. He'd made assumptions like this before, however, and one time even opened a strange looking can only to find that it contained women's underwear for reasons he couldn't fathom.

He aligned the can opener with the rim of the can, then looked around just to make sure he was alone. The sun was setting, casting long shadows about his surroundings. They had parked their wagon in a clearing just a few meters off from the highway, and Majic had set up a little campfire nearby. His plan was to eat his dinner early before anyone could catch him in the act.

"I deserve this every once in a while," he reasoned, tilting his head back to look up at the sky. "Whenever it's Claiomh's turn to cook, the stuff she makes is barely even edible. Maybe if we had proper cooking equipment and half-decent ingredients then it wouldn't be so bad, but as it stands, I can't stomach the stuff. And then there's Master, who just eats what he wants, when he wants, and if we miss dinnertime, then we have to just fend for ourselves."

Majic was the kind of boy that the word 'pretty' would suit better than 'handsome,' being a slender fourteen-year-old boy with bright blond hair so fine that it almost shone golden in the sunlight. His clear blue eyes had a gentle

look about them, which made it look like he was deliberately presenting himself as weaker than he actually was. The reason one might get this impression from him was simple — despite his feminine stature and pretty face, he donned the style of black clothes favored almost exclusively by Black Sorcerers. He had left his cloak in the wagon, though, because it was already hot enough outside without it at this time of year.

He finished opening the can and lifted the lid to find that it contained green pea soup.

Oh well, he thought, and decided that at least it was a better meal than anything Claiomh might make. So he set the can above the campfire and let the contents warm up, figuring that he could probably spare a few minutes waiting for it to heat up without getting caught.

He was wrong. While waiting for his meal to cook, he suddenly realized that what he'd been hearing wasn't the crackling of the campfire, but rather footsteps on branches approaching from behind. A shrill voice was what confirmed this fact for him.

"You little rascal!"

Oh, I'm so dead, thought Majic, his whole body freezing up in fear. Terrified, he turned around ever so slowly, and surely enough, it was the very same fair-skinned blonde girl he was oh-so-familiar with. She stood there, pointing at him accusingly.

"Claiomh, this isn't—" Majic tried to make up an excuse on the spot, but Claiomh wasn't about to let that happen.

"Why're you eating already?! You know it was my turn to cook tonight! What, is my cooking not *good enough* for you?!"

If it were Master in this situation, thought Majic, *he'd probably say something like 'Yeah, your cooking tastes like dog crap,' but Claiomh'd hang me if I dared say that to her.*

Orphen wasn't the type to enjoy homemade cooking just for the sake of it, preferring to just eat canned food or simply roast some meat over a fire if he could. That was why whenever it was Claiomh's turn to prepare dinner — which

she insisted on preparing from scratch — he would mysteriously vanish until they had all finished eating. Much like he had wandered off somewhere today.

Majic didn't have the guts to tell Claiomh to her face that he found her cooking disgusting, so he tried to come up with an excuse to wiggle his way out of this.

"L-Look, it's not that, I was just really hungry and I couldn't wait for you to prepare a whole meal..." he said, raising both hands in the air in a show of surrender. Even while striking this pose, he took in everything before him in great detail. He noticed that Claiomh's jeans were a bit dirty, likely because she'd been walking around in the thicker parts of the woods. Because of the heat, she had chosen to wear a light, sleeveless yellow blouse. While both of these articles of clothing were, in fact, her own (which Orphen had paid for), she actually had a bad habit of rummaging through Majic's belongings and swiping any of his clothes that she found to her liking.

"You *couldn't* wait? Oh, so I'm just too slow at making the food, am I?! Do I not work fast enough for your greedy little stomach?!"

"Th-That's not what I meant by that..."

"Then what *did* you mean by it?!"

"Look, it's not what you think..." muttered Majic, slowly backing away from Claiomh on his behind.

Majic had never been very good at dealing with Claiomh. She was so straightforward that she showed no restraint in any of her emotions. Whenever she sulked, she sulked for days at a time, sometimes not even uttering a single word the whole while. But when she got angry, she got *furious*, and often quickly resorted to violence because of it, refusing to listen to reason and never putting up with excuses.

I'm amazed that Master can actually keep up with this girl, Majic thought to himself as he cowered before her. *Maybe it's just because they're so similar that they're able to get along at all...*

"Well then? If it's not what I think, then what is it?!"

Majic held his hand out in front of himself as though begging for Claiomh not

to come any closer. All the while, he prayed to the heavens that he would make it out of this without suffering *too* much.



In a certain time, at a certain place, a certain incident occurred which set everything into motion...

While this incident was happening, Orphen was walking through the woods. He had already wandered some several hundred meters from where he had parked the wagon.

The reason he had wandered this far into the woods was not, in fact, to escape from Claiomh's terrible cooking. In truth, he didn't even think Claiomh's cooking was anywhere near as bad as Majic always made it out to be. But then, Orphen had a better frame of reference to compare Claiomh's cooking to, considering that he had gone through a period where he had to learn to cook for himself and failed miserably on many occasions.

Indeed, his reason for being all the way out here in the middle of the woods was slightly more important than that.

Orphen wore his usual cynical-looking expression, which was actually just how his face was shaped. The way his eyes were slanted made him look more nasty than he really was. He wore a red bandanna to keep his messy black hair out of his eyes, and the rest of his clothes were similarly designed with ease of movement in mind; all black, as was the Sorcerer way. Despite his battle-oriented outfit, though, Orphen didn't carry any form of weapon at all. For skilled Sorcerers, their spells were both their sword and their shield, meaning there wasn't usually much reason for them to arm themselves with conventional weapons. The more cautious Sorcerers, however, (particularly those associated with the Tower of Fangs) would always make sure to hide away at least one or two weapons somewhere on their persons, usually assassination tools such as small knives or steel wire.

In order to hide such weapons on themselves, most battle-conscious Sorcerers actually preferred to wear long black robes covering their entire bodies. This allowed them to hide any number of tools or weapons under their clothes, or wear all sorts of protective equipment underneath their robes,

which let them be prepared to battle in any environment.

In stark comparison, Orphen wore steel-toed leather boots, black pants, a black shirt, and a short-sleeved (almost sleeveless) black leather jacket. This was an odd choice of outfit for a Black Sorcerer of the Tower of Fangs, but then again, Orphen had left the Tower behind long ago. The only connection he had left with the Tower was the pendant he wore around his neck — a one-legged dragon wrapping itself around a sword. This pendant was proof that the Tower of Fangs — the most elite Sorcerers' Academy on the Continent — had acknowledged a person as a skilled Black Sorcerer by their standards, and so it essentially acted as both a form of license and proof of identity.

This meant nothing to Orphen, however, as he had no intention of putting himself up for hire as a mercenary. This attitude was also why he didn't bother with the whole cloaks-and-daggers trend that other Sorcerers seemed so fond of.

Right as he was thinking about how he wasn't traveling for the sake of fighting people, he came to a halt and examined his surroundings, fairly certain of what was to come next.

"I'm right here," he called out.

"Anyone with eyes could see that," came a voice from his left.

The owner of the voice stepped out from behind a tree, revealing herself to be a slim woman wearing a skin-tight black leather bodysuit. "And I suppose you're the Orphen I'm looking for?"

"Do you see any other Orphens around?" laughed the Orphen in question, returning the woman's banter.

The two locked eyes and began summing each other up. Orphen's eyes were naturally drawn to the woman's strangely glossy black hair, which weaved itself around her bodysuit almost as if it were moving with a mind of its own. She was almost abnormally thin, and the only way he could describe her face was 'pointed.'

The woman opened her blood-red lips and introduced herself. "I'm Philietta. I'm assuming you got my invitation?"

“You mean that scrap of paper some random village brat ran up and handed to me?” Orphen responded, carefully taking his hand out of his pocket to prepare himself.

The woman — Philietta — nodded with a dangerous smile on her face. “That’s the one,” she said.

“Then yeah, I got your note. And I read it. That’s why I’m here. Are we done now?”

“Oh my, such an impatient man you are.”

“Can we just hurry up and get this over with?”

“Well, since you asked so politely...”

The moment the words left Philietta’s mouth, they both moved at once. Orphen leaped backwards, and a silver flash of light came chasing after him with blinding speed.

Philietta had pulled out a large silver dagger and struck at Orphen in a single swift, trained motion. He just barely managed to avoid being sliced open.

This bitch is crazy! he said to himself in astonishment.

Philietta followed up her attack with another, and Orphen just barely managed to slip past her. Even though her attacks had missed twice already, Philietta didn’t show any signs of relenting. She spun her dagger around and held it in a backhand grip, poising herself face-to-face with Orphen. The faint light of dusk painted the area in deep shades of orange and red, which reflected from Philietta’s knife as though it were dyed in blood.

Orphen inhaled as deeply as he could, grumbling internally all the while.

Alright, who’s after me this time? Is it that pain in the ass Ostwald again? Has he seriously started sending assassins after me now?

Orphen’s hypothesis was spot-on, though he had no way of knowing this for sure.

Even if it’s not him, someone wants me dead — Fuck that! You won’t be seeing my name in the obituaries part of the newspaper anytime soon!

Orphen swung his right hand in Philietta's direction.

"Gather at my command, Shield of Amber!"

The atmosphere before his extended hand rapidly increased in density, forming a wall of air between them. The force was enough to knock Philietta a couple of steps away from him. Because of spells like this, ordinary humans shouldn't ever be able to lay so much as a finger on a skilled Sorcerer.

But that doesn't apply to assassins specifically sent to deal with Sorcerers, Orphen knew. While I can keep her at bay like this, that doesn't mean I've got the upper hand. She's bound to have something else up her sleeve.

People working in that kind of dangerous business would always formulate a plan before even challenging a Sorcerer. They would never just rush blindly into battle with one unless they knew that they had some prospect of victory. There was no doubt that she had laid a trap somewhere, but Orphen couldn't figure out where or what that trap might be.

In nine cases out of ten, falling for a trap laid by an assassin as skilled and experienced as this meant certain death. For that reason, Orphen feared these ordinary human assassins far more than any of the Dragon races, because Dragons would predictably rely on their superior sorcery, meaning their attack patterns were generally straightforward. He always made sure to be extremely cautious in situations like the one he had currently found himself in.

That said, there's nobody in the world who just naturally assumes that they're being targeted by a professional killer. I probably fucked up by coming out here all on my own...

Orphen scolded his own carelessness and held his ground as Philietta, repelled by the compressed wall of air, had been sent flying and landed on her back. While Orphen's instincts screamed at him to run while he had the chance, he knew better than to turn his back on an opponent like this one.

The best way to avoid falling into a trap... is to not walk carelessly into it!

Reassuring himself that he was making the correct decision, Orphen stood without taking a single step and aimed another spell at the female assassin.

"Guide my path, Deathsong Starling!"

He launched an ultrasonic attack from his fingertip, aimed precisely at Philietta. The air shook and reverberated violently, enveloping the assassin, the ground beneath her feet and all. The fierce oscillations caused cracks to appear in the ground, and Philietta's body shot upright like she had just been electrocuted.

When the sonic attack subsided, Philietta fell to the ground, motionless.

Silence fell on the battleground. Orphen still stood battle-ready, waiting for the assassin to make her next move. But contrary to his expectations, she lay there on the ground, seemingly having been knocked unconscious by his attack.

"Quit faking it. I'm not stupid enough to think that was enough to take you out," he called out with absolute certainty. "If a spell like that was enough to finish the fight, then you're either a huge idiot for trying to take on a Sorcerer, or you seriously let your guard down bigtime."

A few seconds passed, and just as he expected, the woman rose somewhat unsteadily to her feet. She wiped the blood from her lips on the sleeve of her leather suit and picked up her dagger with her other hand.

"Looks like you're not stupid enough to fall for that trick... although to be honest, I think I really did pass out for a few seconds there."

"I held back enough so that it wouldn't kill you, but you still took a direct hit. You won't be able to move too well with your body in that condition."

"I wonder about that?" said Philietta, leaping towards Orphen with unexpected speed and strength. She swung her dagger with such force that he could hear it cutting through the air, just barely able to avoid the attack by rolling onto his back. He managed to put some distance between them, but he was still visibly shaken by what had just happened.



“What the hell’s going on?!” he yelled in confusion.

I know I was holding back, but there should still’ve been enough force behind that to knock out a horse! There’s no way a person could move like that after taking a direct hit!

But facts were facts, and the fact was that the woman was still moving as swiftly as ever, like she’d never been hit at all. Orphen continued to dodge her attacks while trying to close in on her, and finally managed to get close enough to press his right hand against her side.

“I tear through thee, Wall of Wind!”

The air around his hand was suddenly erased, creating a small vacuum. The surrounding air naturally moved in to fill this vacuum with great force, which acted as a powerful blade of wind and struck the female assassin so hard it sent her flying. Normally this spell was powerful enough to cleave a small tree in half, but again, the scene before Orphen’s eyes betrayed his expectations.

The woman had landed several meters away with her back pressed up against a thick tree, but her suit hadn’t been so much as grazed. While the spell itself hadn’t done any damage, the back of her head had been bashed against the tree with quite some force. That seemed to have given her a mild concussion, as she stood there trying to get her bearings instead of launching into her next attack.

Hang on a second... thought Orphen, a theory forming in his mind. He decided to test it out.

“Don’t come back to haunt me even if this kills you,” he muttered. He extended his right hand towards her and yelled: “I release thee, Sword of Light!”

From his hand erupted a brilliant, fierce torrent of light. He had made sure to hold back enough that the light didn’t engulf Philietta’s entire body, instead shaping it into a spear aimed straight at her abdomen. The spear of light struck its target and erupted in an explosion of light and flames, accompanied by a thunderous roar.

Dust and debris danced around the air in the aftermath of the blast, but even

now, the female assassin stood without so much as a burn mark on her suit. The force of the explosion appeared to have shaken her body violently enough to injure her somewhat, but this was a ridiculously tiny injury considering the blast should have burned a hole straight through her.

“Shit. I knew it,” swore Orphen.

“That’s no ordinary outfit. What the hell’s that thing made of?”

“Something strong enough to withstand anything *you* could throw at it,” the woman replied, unsteady on her feet from both the concussion and the force of the explosion. She took her dagger in hand and cut off the burnt ends of her hair that had been caught up in the blast.

Still the woman stood before him, apparently not about to give up just yet.

C’mon, Majic, you’ve gotta have noticed all this commotion by now. Where the hell are you when I need you?! thought Orphen.

“Whatever that suit’s made of, the one wearing it’s just a regular person. All I gotta do is blast off your head,” he said.

“Then why don’t you? If it’s for self-defense, I’m sure you won’t be charged *too* heavily,” said Philietta half-jokingly. Even now, she held her dagger at the ready, with the same sharp smile adorning her face.

Orphen clicked his tongue. “These days, anything you do to protect yourself would be judged as excessive use of force. Besides, if someone held up a photo of your headless corpse in a courtroom, who’s gonna believe *that* was the result of *legitimate self-defense*?”

“Since you were kind enough not to behead me, I’ll let you in on a little secret,” said Philietta with a flick of her hair. “The one who hired me to kill you was a man called Ostwald. Xanadu Ostwald.”

“That greedy loanshark from Totokanta? I had a feeling it might’ve been him. I did kinda piss him off while doing business on his turf. Why’re you telling me this, though? Decided to betray your employer in exchange for your life?”

“Not quite,” said Philietta with a much less fierce smile this time. She could almost be called attractive without all that bloodlust in her eyes.

“You see,” she continued, “he was just *one* of my employers for this job. In fact, his request comes second to my real employer’s job for me.”

“...So, what? There are a whole bunch of people who want me dead all of a sudden?”

“Whyever would you jump to that conclusion? I never said a word about my real employer wanting you dead. Don’t you think you’re getting a bit full of yourself, assuming that everybody’s after your head?”

Without so much as blinking, Philietta finished her explanation by throwing her dagger straight at Orphen.

“Dammit!” he yelled, just barely reacting in time to avoid the attack. This wasn’t a conscious movement, but more of a reflex that saved him by the skin of his teeth. Or so he thought.

By the time Orphen realized that the dagger hadn’t been aimed at him, its true target was already crying out his death rattle. Orphen turned to find a middle-aged man armed with a small crossbow, Philietta’s dagger sticking out of his throat and blood gushing out all over him.

Orphen was left speechless as the nameless new assassin’s corpse dropped to the ground. Philietta shrugged her shoulders and decided to explain everything in full.

“Ostwald is a very cautious man. He had already hired a number of hitmen to come after you long before reaching out to me.”

“...Then why are you killing off your co-workers instead of doing your job?”

“Like I said, Ostwald’s request was just something I picked up on a whim. I never refuse a job request, but I’ll freely abandon a job partway through if something else happens to take priority,” said Philietta in a much more casual tone than she had been using until now.

She walked briskly past Orphen, completely disregarding the possibility of being attacked from behind, and simply went to retrieve her dagger from the other man’s corpse.

“Alright, what’s *really* going on here?”

“I was working for Ostwald temporarily, but now I quit. My *real* sponsor’s request was to find the strongest Sorcerer I could, and to guide you to them.”

Orphen scratched his head, trying to piece everything together.

“Okay,” he said dubiously, “then why the hell’d you attack me instead of just asking me to tag along?”

“How am I supposed to know if you’re *really* a skilled Sorcerer without confirming it firsthand? If you had died, then I’d have fulfilled Ostwald’s request and gotten paid for that before going off to look for another, stronger Sorcerer. But since you beat me in a straight-up fight and proved beyond a doubt that you could’ve killed me any number of times during that scuffle, it means I can just quit Ostwald’s request and guide you to my real sponsor. Do you get it now?”

Philietta’s tone of voice implied that she wanted to know whether Orphen truly did understand her reasoning, and that she sincerely expected an answer from him. Instead, he posed another question — one that had suddenly become a lot more important.

“Let’s say everything you’ve said is true. In that case, who is this mysterious *real sponsor* of yours?”

“Who... knows!” she said casually as she ripped her dagger out of the dead man’s throat, splattering blood on her face. While handling the man’s corpse, her suit had also gotten drenched in blood.

She turned to face Orphen in that state and responded in a tone so casual it made the sight before him look all the more surreal. “I can’t very well go giving my employer’s name away just because you asked politely, now can I?”

“I’m amazed you can say that with a straight face,” said Orphen sarcastically.

Now, under normal circumstances, Orphen would never agree to go along with a job like this. Casually agreeing to just tag along with an assassin who had tried to murder him mere moments ago? It certainly wasn’t something he’d have ever found himself agreeing to. *Under normal circumstances*, that is.

As he looked at the woman before him wearing all that blood like a second skin, he suddenly realized that he had heard the name Philietta somewhere

before.

Philietta, the Fools' Hound. If the rumors about her were true...

...Then she was an honest-to-goodness Sorcerer hunter.



In a certain time, at a certain place, a certain incident occurred which set everything into motion...

While this incident was happening, Dortin was basically right there. He was involved in absolutely no way whatsoever.

In fact, if there was an incident that Dortin *was* currently involved in...

"Step right up, step right up! You wouldn't want to miss the grand unveiling of the show of a lifetime! Come one, come all, and see with your own two eyes, 'The Terrifying Snake-Man!' Tickets to view this incredible show cost absolutely nothing! Did you hear that, folks?! For today only, in commemoration of the first show ever put on by Volkan's Theater, you can get front-row seats to a performance so legendary that you'll need to book tickets for centuries in advance from now on! That's how spectacular our show will be!"

...It was that he was wrapped up in another of his older brother's increasingly ridiculous money-making schemes. 'Trapped inside' might have been a better way of putting it, though, given that Dortin had basically been shoved into this big wooden box without warning and told to stay inside until Volkan gave the signal. Where the box had come from, and why it smelled like rotten meat, were details that Volkan had, as usual, neglected (refused) to explain.

"That's right, centuries! This show will go down as legendary, and you, ladies and gentlemen, will have been the first and only folks in your lifetime to see it! If you wish to donate to our cause, you may leave any and everything you can afford to in this here big old leather bag at the end of the show!"

Whatever Volkan was on about this time, Dortin neither knew nor cared. And if he were a real theater performer, then he'd probably rather *not* put this particular show on his own resume, to say the least.

It sounded as though Volkan was at least managing to draw up a crowd,

though. Now all Dortin had to do was wait for the signal and then pop out of the box, and his job would be done. That was the entirety of the script that Volkan had written up.

Why do I even put up with this? Dortin sighed internally.

He had been against this idea from the very beginning, but his brother had, as always, refused to listen. While it was true that they were in a remote village with very little in the way of entertainment, quite some distance from the nearest city with any actual theater house, what Volkan had come up with was less of an act and more of a bad joke with no real punchline. Dortin couldn't imagine there being a single person on the Continent who would pay a single coin to see it, and even if that single person did pay a single coin for the privilege, he was convinced that that person would later demand a refund immediately afterwards.

He took off his glasses and wiped the lenses on the hem of his fur coat, wondering to himself how he and his brother had managed to survive out on the road for as long as they had.

Two years had passed since Volkan had kidnapped Dortin from their hometown and gone off on this misadventure, and a lot had happened in those two years. They had almost died countless times for any number of reasons, every last one of which could inevitably be traced back to Volkan. But the first and perhaps even worst of all was the time Volkan had 'borrowed' a particularly large sum of money from an unlicensed moneylending Sorcerer with a personality that would make a venomous snake look like a baby kitten.

While Dortin was in the midst of counting all the wrongs his brother had ever done him, said brother suddenly raised his voice.

"And now, the moment you've all been waiting for! Behold, the pitiful appearance of the world's one and only Snake-Man!"

Dortin stiffened up, missing his cue as a result. He was just barely able to get his glasses back on his face when suddenly the lid of the box was flipped open, flooding the dark interior with blinding sunlight.

When Dortin's vision cleared, he noticed that what he'd expected to be a relatively small number of people had turned out to be quite the large crowd.

Most of them were women, children, and the elderly. The men of the village were likely still working, since it was early afternoon on a warm summer day. The few teenagers in the crowd must have been skipping school/church (it wasn't strange for churches to double as school facilities in smaller villages like these) and found themselves here out of boredom with nothing better to do.

Then, to the side of the box, Dortin spotted his older brother, Volkan, supporting the lid and waiting for the crowd to react. He was a messy-haired dwarf who stood at 130 centimeters in height. His fur cloak was similar to Dortin's own, and the only major difference between their outfits was that Volkan carried a small broadsword hanging from his belt.

Dwarfs like Volkan and Dortin normally only lived in their own territory far at the southernmost edge of the Continent in a place called Masmaturia. It was rare to see dwarfs in or around human settlements these days, but this had not always been the case. Dwarfs had actually been living on the Continent far longer than humans had, which made them the aborigines. When humans had first arrived on the Continent some hundreds of years prior, their numbers rapidly multiplied, and they soon outnumbered the dwarfs and filled the Continent with cities and villages from one end to the other. Nowadays, dwarfs were treated as a nuisance or generally discriminated against in human settlements due to the huge difference in their cultures.

Dortin was wearing one thing that most dwarfs would not be generally be spotted running around with strapped to the top of his head, though. The husk that had been left behind when a giant snake had shed its skin. The hollow snake's head had just been slapped onto Dortin's head, and that was it. Enduring the embarrassment of having to stand in front of such a large crowd with such a ridiculous thing on his head, he read out his only spoken line with about as much enthusiasm as his own snake-skin hat: "Roar!"

...

The silent crowds immediately erupted into cheers as though they'd been collectively holding their breath for this very moment.

"It worked!" yelled Volkan to himself, pumping his fist.

Dortin, confused, tried to make out what was going on by the conversations

he could overhear amidst all the commotion.

“Look, mommy, look! It’s a pair of traveling circus performers!”

“Man, I thought freak show acts died out last century!”

“Don’t poke at it, Michael. What’d you do if it was actually real?”

...Something tells me these people aren’t very convinced by this costume,
Dortin thought to himself.

Volkan, however, took the crowd’s reaction as a massive success and immediately opened the mouth of his large leather bag, just waiting for the crowd to begin throwing in all their wallets and valuables. “Ladies and gentlemen, if you feel even the slightest bit sorry for this poor soul, then please consider donating that we might pay for the surgery to turn him back into a normal person! Our journey shall surely take us back and forth across the lands, so feel free to follow and donate as many times as—”



By the time Volkan had gotten the words out, though, most of the crowd had already dispersed, and the rest were following suit.

“I haven’t laughed that hard in years.”

“I’ve never even heard of dwarfs working as traveling comedians before!”

“Never mind dwarfs, I never thought there was anyone out there who’d *willingly* shame themselves in public like that.”

“I thought it was cute. It’s these little cultural things that we really need to preserve.”

“If we’re gunna pur-serve ‘em, I gots stuff ye use fer bug collectin’!”

Dortin stood wordlessly at his brother’s back in the now-empty plaza, letting only a sigh escape his lips. He removed the snake’s husk from his head and turned to Volkan, telling him, “This is why I didn’t wanna go through with it.”

Volkan managed to misinterpret even this. “You’re right. I knew we should’ve gone with ‘A Modern Superhero! The Unkillable Man!’ and skewered the box with my sword.”

“And who were we gonna find to put *in* the box?”

“Don’t be stupid. You, of course. An even better one would’ve been ‘The Demon with Glowing Eyes! Dortin the Deadly Vanishes Into Flames!’ which you also rejected.”

“Because I don’t want to be set on fire!”

“Fool! Do you know nothing of the plight of the fledgling entertainer?! Just be thankful you even get a role, or I’ll melt you to death in a vial of Nessler’s reagent!”

Volkan smacked Dortin in the face as hard as he could, but the younger boy had already lost the will to resist. He merely wiped away his nosebleed with one hand before pulling himself back to his feet.

With the crowds now gone, Dortin took a better look at the village. The large plaza they had performed their show in was located at the dead center of the village, right in front of the old-fashioned church school. It wasn’t a particularly

large village, but that didn't mean it was very small, either. Narrow streets and roads stretched outwards from the central plaza like a spider's web, mostly leading to different residential areas. A village of this size was more like a medium-sized town, but for some reason, human government officials refused to recognize anything as more than a 'village' without a sturdy outer wall surrounding most of it, regardless of how huge the place got.

Villages like this one could be found near highways all across the land. And because they were located near highways, they often had at least one or two inns for travelers. Not that Volkan and Dortin could afford to stay at an inn, choosing instead to sneak into a local stable and pass the days there while earning money with their performance arts... or so they would have done, if everything had gone according to Volkan's plans.

Unfortunately for the dwarfs, they had been caught one night by a concerned villager who introduced them to the town's only inn, which the innkeeper was kind enough to let them stay at for free so long as they worked there part-time until they left the village.

Since they still had to make money in order to get back on the road, Volkan had suggested they go ahead with their performance acts anyway, and this was to be the day of their big debut into stardom... or, well, a way to buy bread, at the very least.

Dortin went over the plan again in his head while staring down at the giant snake head's discarded husk at his feet. It was an incredible thing almost the size of Dortin himself, meaning the thing that shed it must have been tens of meters long.

"So, Bro... where did you find this stuff, anyway? I can't really picture this peaceful little village having a giant snake's nest right next to it and nobody noticing until now."

"You see, my dimwitted brother," began Volkan proudly, "I found it thrown away in the nearby woods next to that big old empty wooden crate."

"Hrmm..." grumbled Dortin, who decided to take a better look at the wooden crate in question. It was big enough for a person — or a dwarf, at least — to fit inside, being a cube of one meter in height. It was quite the sturdy thing, and

customizing it so that the lid would flip open so simply for their performance had taken a bit of elbow grease.

As plain as the object was, Dortin still couldn't help but feel something strangely foreboding about the whole thing.

"What's wrong, my blundering baby brother? I can't blame you for mulling over your own mistake, but I really must be coming up with a better plan for tomorrow's performance already."

"Oh... nah, it's nothing important, really," replied Dortin, still trying to figure it out in his head.

The weathered red writing on the front of the box appeared to be some kind of hint as to what the contents may once have been, but all that Dortin could make out was the number 000001 followed by a year, month and day. If this was the date the box was constructed, then it was about a decade old. Beneath that were the usual warnings one might find on a crate like this one, such as 'FRAGILE,' 'HANDLE WITH CARE,' 'THIS WAY UP,' etc.

And then, much more conspicuously than all of the other warnings, 'DANGER — DO NOT OPEN.'



The incident which occurred that day in Kink Hall Village went unnoticed by all, for Kink Hall Village was not a particularly notable place even at the liveliest of times.

But far more importantly, the incident went unnoticed because all of those involved... had already died many years prior.

Chapter II: The Fools Become Trapped

“Y’know, Orphen...”

“Y’know, Claiomh...”

Without warning, the two started arguing over top of each other.

“You’re such a womanizer, you know that?”

“You’re such a spoiled brat, you know that?”

And then, silence. Even the horses trotting in front of the wagon seemed to feel the air growing tense, and Orphen could’ve sworn that he felt them trembling before the oncoming verbal storm even through their reigns.

Seated next to Orphen at the front of the wagon was Claiomh, who seemed to be sulking about something or other.

“What’d I do to get branded a womanizer?”

“How come you always call me a spoiled brat?”

And the conversation died there. The scenery flowed smoothly by as the wagon made its way down the highway. The gentle summer breeze rustled the greenery around them, and the wagon kicked up a small cloud of dirt in its wake. The position of the sun showed that it was just a little past noon.

Orphen thought back to the events of the previous night with a grimace. He had returned to their campsite only to find Majic and Claiomh arguing about something or other over dinner, when Orphen had walked into the clearing with a blood-soaked Philietta following right behind him. When he realized that he’d never be able to come up with a believable excuse, he decided to just tell Majic and Claiomh the whole story for once. The gist of it was that Philietta was willing to protect Orphen from these hired hitmen for free.

He awoke the very next morning, though, only to find that Philietta had vanished without a trace. The only sign that she’d ever been there at all was a single note folded up next to the pillow of Orphen’s sleeping bag.

Philietta said in her note that she had important business to take care of, so she'd be going on ahead. She also said that if Orphen wanted to meet her mysterious sponsor, then he'd have to come to the next designated location.

The contents of the note weren't anything special. It was the fact that she'd left a note at all that seemed to have sparked a huge misunderstanding with Claiomh. While Philietta had probably left just shortly after they had all fallen asleep, Claiomh doubtless assumed that she had spent the entire night with Orphen. *Not that she'd ever dare say that out loud*, he reasoned.

"Well, it's only been about a month since I've met you, right?" With an exaggerated pout, Claiomh decided to make her case first. "In that time, you've proposed to my sister—"

"That was a ruse. Volkan's ruse. And I was forced to go along with it or risk getting arrested for attempted fraud. Which happened anyway."

"Then there was that really pretty waitress working at the roadside inn. I saw you copping a feel of her butt."

"That's just a misunderstanding. I brushed up against her when walking past, and *her* fat ass brushed up against *my* hand."

"And then in Alenhatam—"

"This better not be about Steph, because I already cleared that one up. She's just an old friend."

"Not Stephanie. The pretty girl working the crepe stand. You rarely ever eat sweets, so you *had* to have been using that as an excuse to hit on her."

"I bought that for *you* when you were refusing to cheer up, remember? What, you're pissed off that it was a girl selling them? Should I have bought it from some handsome guy instead?"

"That's not what I'm saying. Even before that, on our way to Alenhatam, I saw you waving at that pretty rich girl in her big fancy wagon as we passed each other."

"Are your eyes just constantly glued to me or something...? Yeah, I waved at her. Because she waved at us first. I was just being polite. Not that you'd know

what that word means.”

“You could’ve just ignored her like you do with me! And ever since Alenhatam, whenever we rent a room, you lock me out for a few hours to get some alone-time with Majic. I don’t really mind which way you swing, but he’s just a boy!”

“I’m teaching him *sorcery*, you little shit! It’s not the kinda thing you’re supposed to study around normal people! It’s dangerous!”

“...”

Having seen some of Orphen’s sorcery battles firsthand, Claiomh couldn’t argue against this point. Or rather, it took her a moment to pick apart his logic and turn Orphen’s own point against him.

“In that case, I don’t wanna be a normal person! Teach me sorcery, too!”

“Not happening,” stated Orphen matter-of-factly.

Claiomh was undeterred. “How come?” she asked.

“First, because you can’t use sorcery. And second, because you can’t afford my tuition fees. Even if by some miracle you could use sorcery, the main difference between you and Majic is that his dad’s paying for those lessons, which makes Majic my first and *only* official student.”

This was, in fact, completely true. Majic’s father had already started making payments into Orphen’s bank account, which was why they had to stop at a major city at least once a month so that he could withdraw the money. Because the whole process involved sending carrier pigeons back and forth between Totokanta and wherever Orphen and co. were on the Continent at the time, it might take anywhere from a few days to a week for the payment and withdrawal processes to go through, which meant they had to stay at expensive inner-city inns rather than cheaper roadside ones, or camping out for free as Orphen would have preferred.

Claiomh thought about this for a moment, and then continued: “But you’re saying that even if I could afford your lessons, there’d be no point? Who made you the authority on who gets to use sorcery or not?”

“It’s not a matter of permission. It’s genetic. Sorcerers are born with an inherent aptitude for sorcery, and normal humans aren’t. This is because Sorcerers have some Dragon blood in their veins. The only way you’d be able to use sorcery is if you were reborn or reincarnated as a Sorcerer or a Dragon.”

“So I’ll have to wait until I’m reborn, huh...” muttered Claiomh with a hint of admiration in her voice. If only she acted like that all of the time, then Orphen might mistake her for any other cute girl her age.

Damn shame I’ve seen what she’s really like, he sighed to himself. If I hadn’t seen how wild, reckless, and stupid she can be when she’s waving that sword of hers around, maybe even I would’ve fallen for this cuter side of her. If only she wasn’t the biggest thorn I’ve ever had in my side, that is.

“If I’m ever reborn, I wanna be reborn as a Sorcerer,” said the girl, rocking herself happily from side to side.

Orphen shot her a sidelong glance. “What, you believe in reincarnation? In that case, I’d wanna be reborn as the second daughter of some well-to-do family. I’d live life at my own relaxed pace, I’d keep my nose out of trouble, and I’d never, under any circumstances, find myself tagging along with a black market moneylender on his Continental journey to beat the money out of his worst ever clients — and I use that word loosely.”

“What, was that meant to be a jab at me?”

“Depends on how you look at it. Maybe I’m calling you a selfish little brat who’s tagging along with me for no reason and constantly buying yourself new stuff with *my* money. Or more likely, I’m just wondering aloud why a girl from such a pampered environment would wanna tag along with a shady guy like me.”

“Hmm?”

Orphen noticed Claiomh frowning when he said this. He thought she was about to go off sulking into another one of her moods, but that didn’t seem to be what it was this time. It looked more like she was just trying to figure out how best to explain herself in words.

She took her time thinking about it, starting off by saying, “At first, I sorta

took you for the kinda guy who'd probably never ask me that," before tilting her chin on her index finger and continuing. "But then after a while, I sorta just knew you'd ask sooner or later. So, I came up with an answer in advance, but..."

"But what? Changed your mind?"

"Sorta, but not really... Remember back in Alenhatam when you said we had 'good teamwork' and started treating me like your partner?"

"..." Orphen could feel his entire body stiffening the moment she brought that up. He had said it on the spur of the moment and was sure he'd come to regret it sooner or later, but right now, it felt like it had come totally out of left field.

"I can't really explain it very well," Claiomh continued, "but you know how I was raised all prim and proper, right? Oh come on, don't look at me like that."

"No, it's just... never mind," said Orphen. He made sure to avert his gaze, just in case.

"Anyway, I'd never met anyone like you before in my entire life. I mean, you're basically an outlaw, right?"

"...I'm sure glad I'm not, because the police are more of a hassle than hired assassins."

"I'm just kidding. Anyway, when you rushed to our aid like that, it really inspired me. When I saw how reliable you were, I felt for the first time in my life that I wanted to better myself. I wanted to improve myself enough that they wouldn't be embarrassed to call me 'partner' or that people could point to us and call us 'a good team.'"

"...And how'd that person end up being me?" asked Orphen in a voice even he could tell was hoarse. He wasn't surprised that Claiomh remembered that heated moment in the middle of battle, but he hadn't meant it as seriously as Claiomh seemed to have taken it.

"I mean, just look at you — You're incredible. I know you're an incredible person, and I guess I started feeling like I want you to look at me the same way."

"...I already think you're pretty incredible in a lot of ways, for what it's

worth.”

“Really?” poked Claiomh with a light smile. Orphen couldn’t bring himself to return the gesture. He felt like someone had just stabbed him in the vitals.

So basically, this crazy girl won’t rest until she’s managed to totally outdo me and leave me speechless. She wants to fire off giant, flashy spells that she can’t handle. That’s not something a sane person should aspire to...

Majic was the next to speak up. “Maaasteerrr...” he cried weakly from the wagon interior. “Are were theeere yeeet?”

The moment the boy stuck his face out from between the curtains closing off the driver’s seat from the canopy interior, Claiomh’s expression turned sour. From the way she was glaring at the poor boy, Orphen guessed that she had probably ordered Majic not to dare show his face outside of the wagon ever since their fight the previous night. While this could possibly mean trouble for Majic down the road, Orphen couldn’t have been happier to see his student’s face right now.

The poor boy was drenched in sweat, and doubtless the interior of the wagon was like a sauna in this summer heat.

“We’re supposed to be going to somewhere called Kink Hall, right? How much faaartheer....”

“Dunno,” replied Orphen, checking the note Philietta had left him. “Philietta said we’re supposed to meet her at Kink Hall, but that was basically it.”

In fact, there had been slightly more written on the note, but this was the one thing Orphen didn’t want the others finding out about. He quickly scrunched the paper up into a ball and thrust it back into his pocket.

“What’s so special about Kink Hall, anyway?”

“Beats me. I’ve never heard of the place before.” After a brief pause, Orphen continued. “No, wait. Come to think of it, there was supposedly some Sorcerer living way out there, away from the rest of civilization.”

“A Sorcerer? If it’s someone even *you’ve* heard of, then they must’ve been from the Tower of Fangs as well, right?” asked Majic.

Orphen shook his head. “True, he was originally from the Tower of Fangs, but he didn’t leave the same way I did. He was expelled. Exiled, even. Apparently, he’d been researching something that even the freaks at the Tower found absolutely repulsive, so they drove him out and decried all his research as wicked and heretical. Or was it because he’d slept with one of the Elder’s secretaries? Anyway, I don’t remember what got him expelled, but I do remember hearing that he went on to continue his research in a remote little village called Kink Hall.”

“...You keep talking about him in the past tense,” muttered Majic, still struggling to wipe his face clean of sweat. Feeling sorry for the poor boy, Orphen handed him a handkerchief before replying.

“Well, yeah. I’ve never heard anything about him apart from that one story. On the other hand, that also means nobody’s been out to confirm his death. Either way, he was driven out of the Tower about fifty years ago, and he was already pretty old at the time. If he was still alive, he’d be over a hundred years old, at least. I guess it’s not impossible, but...”

“I know an old lady who turns a hundred and twenty next year,” added Claiomh.

“I’m sure you do,” said Orphen, patting the girl on the head. He was secretly relieved that Claiomh had just nonchalantly joined in the conversation like that, because at least it meant that she wasn’t dwelling on their earlier, heavier conversation. By now, she’d probably forgotten all about it — or at least stored it away so that she could bring it up at a later date, which Orphen decided was his future self’s problem to deal with. That said, he could never really read what Claiomh was thinking deep down when it came to these topics, so she was probably going to end up blindsiding him with it next time, too.

Either way, he had earned himself a moment’s reprieve and decided to use that time thinking about more productive things. Things like the balled-up note in his pocket.

In truth, the note had been more than just a simple memo with directions. The part that Orphen had kept hidden from Majic and Claiomh was probably the main reason Philietta had left it for him instead of just giving him the

directions herself.

It read like a joke, however it was anything but. *“Personally, I don’t mind whether I fulfill my sponsor’s request or Ostwald’s request. I’ll leave that decision up to you.”*

To paraphrase: “Meet me at Kink Hall, or I’ll be back to kill you.”

Orphen and the gang rode the wagon down the highway until they eventually came to a signpost pointing down a side road leading to Kink Hall Village. Atop a hill by the side of this road stood a small white church building. Majic was busy taking in the surroundings. “Wow,” he exclaimed.

“Hmm? What’s up?” asked Orphen.

He was wondering what had shocked his student so much — from what Orphen could tell, it was just an ordinary remote village like any other. The wheat fields spreading out in all directions shone golden in the setting sun, showing that they were almost ready to be harvested.

While the village was technically ‘remote,’ that didn’t mean it was small. It was less of a village and more of a small town. In fact, it probably should have been classified a town — being within one hundred kilometers of Alenhatam, one of the four largest cities on the Continent, meant that people would pass through every now and then on their journeys between Alenhatam and wherever else.

On the way into the village, they passed a big stylish estate with a nice fancy gate, a small school with grounds that looked well-kept, and even a small farm on the outskirts of town. There was a boy even younger than Majic working in the fields, turning to look at Orphen’s wagon pass by even as he continued piling hay with a pitchfork. Behind the boy lay an old man dressed in shepherd’s clothes, presumably retired and teaching the boy to do the job to succeed him. In the distance, Orphen could also hear the howling of a farm dog herding sheep.

In other words, it was just a perfectly normal rural village.

“Majic, was something up? Did you notice something?”

Majic turned to face Orphen with his green eyes sparkling like emeralds. “I

was just thinking what a nice place this is!” he said.

“You don’t know that for sure,” said Orphen coolly.

“...Whaddya mean? Don’t tell me you’ve stayed *here* before too, have you? Heck, you probably have a wife and child living here already, don’t you?”

“What are you... No, that’s stupid. This is my first time coming here. What I meant was that you shouldn’t judge a book by its cover. It might look nice from the outside, but we have no idea what’s waiting in store for us behind that.”

Suddenly, Claiomh popped her head out from behind the curtains. It looked as though she’d been enjoying an afternoon nap, because her hair was quite messy, and she seemed to have splashed water on her face to help herself wake up, because her skin was still slightly damp.

Orphen looked Majic in the eyes and pointed at Claiomh. “Exhibit A,” he said.

“...Good point,” Majic nodded, taking the lesson to heart rather quite seriously.

Claiomh noticed the two of them sharing looks, and while she hadn’t heard their earlier conversation, she knew something fishy was going on. “What were you two talking about?” she asked.

“It’s nothing, I promise,” said Majic, averting his gaze in case his facial expressions might give anything away.

With Claiomh awake, Orphen turned back to speak to her. “Oi, remember to hide your sword underneath all our luggage where nobody’s gonna see it. The last thing I want is to be arrested the moment we step into town on suspicion of criminal activity.”

“I don’t need you to tell me that. I’m not an idiot.”

If you weren’t an idiot, then you wouldn’t be carrying a sword around at all in this day and age, thought Orphen to himself. As much as he wanted to, he knew better than to say this aloud. The last thing he needed was Claiomh going off on another one of her moods where she tortured him and Majic for the next few days over a puny argument.

Claiomh looked at the dull countryside scenery and awkwardly posed Orphen

a question. “So how come we have to go out of our way meet this what’s-her-name person in this little village in the middle of nowhere, anyways?”

It seemed she was already in a sour mood over their current situation.

Because Claiomh was leaning forwards out of the curtains, her hair had draped down over Orphen’s shoulder. Orphen couldn’t help but see that hair as a snake threatening to wrap itself around his neck and choke him to death at any moment.

“Well,” he said without looking Claiomh in the face, “I’ve already told you everything that happened, right?”

“A pretty call girl seduced you with a late-night rendezvous, but vanished the next morning, so now you’re chasing after her so you can have some more good time together, right?”

Orphen turned to face Claiomh, clearly agitated. “Like! I! Said! I don’t even know who she is *or* what she wants with me!” he yelled desperately. “I don’t really get what’s going on either, you know. Apparently, she’s a mercenary who’s been hired to protect me by some employer whose name she refused to mention.”

Orphen decided to call Philietta a ‘mercenary’ rather than an ‘assassin’ just because he didn’t want to drag Claiomh or Majic into what could potentially be a very messy situation.

“...Why would someone as strong as you need a bodyguard, anyway?” asked Claiomh, still doubtful but at least not openly hostile anymore.

“Because I’ve got hired killers after me,” grumbled Orphen, turning his attention back to the road in front of him. When the wagon entered the village proper, Orphen looked for the street that seemed most likely to lead to an inn and led the horses down that road.

Upon hearing what Orphen had just said, Majic was suddenly very anxious. “Umm, about those assassins... They’re only after *you*, right? I’m not gonna get wrapped up in all this and die just for tagging along with you, am I?”

“...You’ll probably be just fine. It’s not like they’d get a bonus for killing you two as well. I was the one dealing business on Ostwald’s turf, and that means

I'm his one and only target here."

"Phew. Thank goodness."

"The hell d'ya mean *thank goodness*? Your master's being targeted by assassins, y'know. In fact, thinking about it, they might decide it'd be safer to take you out, too. Since they probably know that you're my student, they might think you'd turn around and try to take revenge for your master's death and would rather nip that problem in the bud while they can."

"I wouldn't even dream of trying to take revenge if anyone killed my master!"

"...Did you really need to yell that so loud?"

"I was just hoping that if any assassins were nearby, that might be enough to put them off trying to kill me, too."

"You cheeky little... Well, whatever. Point is, several people are trying to kill me right now."

"But who could possibly want you dead, and why?" asked Claiomh.

Orphen's answer was as casual as could be. "You know how I'm an illegal moneylender, right? Well, clearly, I don't have any money to lend right now, so I have to go out and collect what people owe me — which is the whole reason I'm chasing that bastard Volkan all across the Continent right now. Volkan wasn't my only client, though. Back in Totokanta, I had Bagup introduce me to a few people who were in need of my services."

"Did you ever get the money back from any of them?"

"Out of seven customers, six made a run for it. I caught five of them. Only four of 'em had enough valuables on them that I could've sold to break even, but out of those guys, only three of them were willing to actually pay me back. Then one of those three had a change of heart and went into hiding, leaving the other two. One of whom got into a traffic accident and was hospitalized, and the other was caught dining and dashing, then sent to prison for violently assaulting a police officer who came to arrest him."

"Not a great start for your business..." said Majic.

"Oh, shut up! I just got unlucky, okay?!" grumbled Orphen. While he

understood full well that he'd brought this on himself, hearing that from his own disciple was somewhat depressing.

Claiomh rested her hand on Orphen's shoulder in an attempt to cheer him up. "Okay, so you said that six of them managed to escape and go into hiding, but what about the seventh? Did that person actually pay you back?"

With a heavy heart, Orphen turned to look Claiomh in the eyes.

"The seventh was none other than Volkan the villain. In his case, he's just too loud and stupid to ever successfully 'go into hiding' no matter where on the Continent he runs to."

"Ever thought of stopping the whole illegal thing and just becoming a licensed moneylender?" poked Claiomh.

"Master... You're not very good at this whole 'making a living' thing, are you?"

"You know what they say; the events in a person's life are determined by what kind of person they are. Good things tend to happen to good people, and bad things tend to happen to bad people."

"...Why the hell should I have to put up with this from *either* of you brats?" grumbled Orphen before continuing. "Here's the thing about official moneylenders. They're basically gangsters and villains who bribe the police into letting them charge ridiculous interest rates. Since I don't have to deal with any of that roundabout semi-legal bullshit, it means that me and other illegal moneylenders can afford to offer better terms than the official ones could. This pisses off the licensed ones like you wouldn't believe. *That's* why I chose the less legal route."

Claiomh and Majic held the exact same skeptical look in their eyes and said what was on their minds in perfect tandem. "And that's why you don't have any money."

"Oh, can it! Back to the point, the one who basically controls the financing and moneylending scene in Totokanta is a man called Xanadu Ostwald. He goes around everywhere in his fancy expensive suits, his wife is a former model, and all his grunt-work employees are built like trees. He's always acting like such a hotshot, a real piece of work. Not that I've ever met him in person."

“...How can you say for certain when you’ve never met him?”

“I just can, alright?! Call it a gut feeling! Hell, the bastard has hired assassins to try and take me out. He’s probably trying to make an example out of me to all the other black market moneylenders working out of Totokanta. It seems like somebody heard all about my situation and sent a bodyguard to watch my back for me.”

The moment the words left Orphen’s mouth, he noticed the contradiction in his own lies.

Philietta said it herself. Ostwald’s job request was just one that she picked up *along the way*, meaning that whoever Philietta was really working for had hired her to seek out Orphen even *before* Ostwald set his eyes on him. To Philietta, Ostwald’s request probably really was just a way to make some pocket change in case Orphen turned out to not be up to the job her true employer needed him for.

Then again, Philietta was notorious for hunting Sorcerers exclusively — and this probably had something to do with her true employer’s request. It was equally as possible that she was the one who had approached Ostwald about the job offer instead of the other way around. Orphen simply had no way of knowing.

What’s she planning to do once she’s found a suitable Sorcerer, anyway? he wondered to himself. He didn’t voice this concern, though, because there was no point giving Claiomh more material for dangerous speculation.

Anyway, if one thing was certain, it was that Orphen was the one being targeted, and his travel companions were so low-priority that they might as well not even exist to his pursuers.

“Get it now?” asked Orphen, turning to face both of his companions.

The only one to answer was Claiomh, and she sounded more troubled than convinced. “Umm... Orphen?”

“What? There still something you don’t get?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just, you’ve had your eyes off the road for a while now...”

“So what? The horses aren’t stupid enough to walk us into a signpost or somebody’s garden or any—”

“No, I mean, I think you just ran someone over. See, you feel that?”

Blurk.

“...”

Just like Claiomh said, there was a strangely fleshy noise coming from beneath one of the wheels. A lone bead of sweat trailed its way down Orphen’s expressionless face.

“Err...” mumbled Orphen, turning to each of his passengers in turn.

“Don’t worry, I’ll wait for the day they let you out of prison♥” chirped Claiomh sweetly.

“Don’t worry about me,” smiled Majic, “I promise I’ll live a fulfilling life, for your sake, too.”

“I swear, you guys are just...” moaned Orphen as he brought the wagon to a halt. Then he noticed that the horses were acting strangely calm despite the fact that they’d just run over a person, which was clearly unnatural. In fact, they actually seemed rather annoyed about the whole thing.

Orphen climbed out of his seat and dropped down to the ground, only to find... a massive snake’s shed skin and a large wooden crate, being dragged along the ground by a young dwarf.

“Ack,” the boy squealed the moment he saw Orphen. His face became the very picture of despair. Orphen nodded in response.

“Dortin!” “Loan shark!” they screamed in unison.

“Which means...” Orphen turned his head to the wagon’s wheel, already pretty sure of what he was about to find.

Sure enough, the messy-haired, fur cloak-wearing, sword-swinging, one and only Vulcano Volkan (who seemed rather unfazed by the whole ordeal) was trapped underneath the wheel. He didn’t seem to have noticed Orphen yet.

“Hey, dammit! What’s the big idea?! Do I stamp all over *your* head when

you're walking down the road?! Get this blasted thing off me before I crush you to death in a folding chair!"

The sun was setting rather quickly. A flock of crows could be heard cawing throughout the mountains and the forests.

With five whole visitors to Kink Hall Village at the same time, it was clear that things were getting commotional.

There was only a single inn in Kink Hall, which was enough, considering that very few people ever traveled there on purpose. It had no real local specialties or attractions, so there was no real reason to go out of one's way to reach it.

Perhaps for this reason, the inn seemed less like a traditional inn than it did a civilian household. Apparently, it was built by some minor celebrity from Totokanta who decided that they wanted an estate somewhere that they could get away from the busy life of the big city. Since then, it had been renovated into a public inn.

"...What made the owner decide to get rid of a place like this?" Orphen wondered aloud.

A young boy — one of the hired help — carried their bags up the stairs, leading Orphen, Majic, and Claiomh to their rooms. He was slightly younger than Majic, with big, round eyes.

Volkan and Dortin had scurried off into the kitchen as soon as they walked through the front door, which was where they were working in exchange for free room and board.

"The owner was murdered a while back," the boy answered without missing a beat. Apparently, it was a story he'd ended up telling most of the guests who stayed here, most of whom probably had similar doubts. "Don't worry, though. It never happened here. It was a Sorcerer who killed him in a mansion outside of town."

"He was killed by a Sorcerer?" asked Claiomh. She was walking behind the rest of the group, letting her eyes wander around the interior of the building.

The boy kept talking, probably expecting a tip if he was hospitable enough.

“Yup. Some old guy called Phono-something.”

“Phonoghoulous,” Orphen said without thinking.

“Right, that was it, Phonoghoulous,” the boy corrected himself, surprised that Orphen knew the name. “He was a famous Sorcerer who built his mansion on the very outskirts of town off in the woods. The place is abandoned now, though. None of the villagers go anywhere near it. They all say it’s haunted.”

“A haunted house?” chirped Claiomh, clapping her hands together in front of her chest. Her bright blue eyes lit up, and it was obvious that whatever was going on in her head at that moment would prove nothing but trouble for Orphen. Her shrill voice echoed throughout the corridors as she continued. “That sounds like fun! We should pay it a visit!”

“Please tell me you’re kidding,” pleaded Majic, but he quickly realized that he was asking the wrong person in this case.

Desperate, he turned to Orphen for reassurance. “Please tell me she’s kidding.”

“This is Claiomh we’re talking about. She’s dead serious,” sighed Orphen in response.

He turned around and reached right over Majic’s head to poke Claiomh with his finger. “Don’t even think about it. Every time you rush into something *interesting*, the situation always takes a turn for the worse. Or did you already forget what happened the last couple of times?”

Claiomh puffed up her cheeks and turned her head away from Orphen. “That wasn’t my fault,” she pouted.

“It sure as hell was. And I don’t wanna have to put up with it a third time, got it?”

By the time they reached their room, though, Claiomh had dropped the subject entirely — for better or worse.

The room itself was a moderately-sized bedroom with two beds in it. It seemed as though it had originally only had one small window for natural light, but a second, much larger one had been installed at the cost of one of the wall

closets. The sturdy walls were decorated with tacky vines-and-leaves patterned wallpaper. Given how modern the design was, it must have been something that the inn's current proprietor had put up after the previous owner had passed away.

Claiomh sneaked the helper boy a rather large tip and sent him on his way before immediately making to prepare one of the beds. She shot Orphen and Majic a sidelong glance as they dropped their bags in a corner of the room, pacing back and forth around the room while going through the closet and drawers.

Seeing her flit about the room in the dim light of the gas lamp, Orphen was finally able to put his finger on what felt out of place with this scene.

"And why're you making yourself at home in *our* room, Claiomh?"

"Hm?" she replied with a little jump. "Well, there are three beds, aren't there?"

"..." Orphen shot a glance at the two beds, and the narrow space between them where a small collapsible bed could be folded out.

Claiomh saw that Orphen had noticed it, and spoke up at exactly that moment. "A real gentleman should know what to do in this situation, right?"

"You can't do that!" protested Majic, clearly misunderstanding. "If you two are sharing a bed, then I'm getting another room!"

"Nobody's sharing any beds," said Orphen, scratching his face while trying to figure out why Claiomh was so desperate to share a room with them. Claiomh returned his gaze and stood there triumphantly, totally sure of her own victory. It felt strange that she was being so insistent on this, which was when it hit him.

"So that's what you're plotting."

"Yup," grinned Claiomh. "You're gonna be teaching Majic some magic again tonight, right? No way I'm missing out on it this time."

"Like I said earlier, it won't do you a lick of good..." Orphen tried to explain once more as he removed his jacket and sat down on one of the beds.

He went over the situation in his head. First and foremost, to put it bluntly, he

would rather die than have to share a room with Claiomh. This wasn't because he hated her or anything like that, but rather he felt that simply being in close proximity to Claiomh for extended periods of time was like *asking* for trouble to go out of its way to come and find them.

That aside, it was clear that she only wanted to sit in on Orphen and Majic's sorcery lesson. There was no rule stating that only Sorcerers could study sorcery, it's just that the knowledge was utterly worthless to ordinary humans with no dragon blood in their veins because they'd never be able to apply that knowledge in any meaningful way.

But most decisively, renting a second room would cost a fair bit of money. Money that Orphen was already painfully short on. Even if he could have afforded a second room just for Claiomh, it would have left him without a penny to his name. This wouldn't really have presented any real problems, considering they usually just camped out by the wagon anyway and had plenty of supplies to last them to the next town, but it never hurt to have at least a little bit of money on hand in an emergency.

I guess it's fine just this once, Orphen concluded.

"Fine, you can stay for the class. But first, dinner."

Orphen's words made Claiomh literally leap and squeal with joy. He had no idea what she was getting so excited about.

...Does she seriously think she can become a Sorceress if she takes enough lessons? It's only gonna disappoint her more when she figures it out for herself. Looks like the focus of tonight's class is gonna have to be something that can make even Claiomh give up on the idea once and for all, thought Orphen. At the time, he truly believed that this was in Claiomh's best interests.

"I know I said 'today's class,' but I've decided that now's a pretty good time to give you a test," announced Orphen after dinner. He had wanted to take Claiomh's mind off of the bugs screeching outside the window this late at night, and there was no shower installed on the premises, as running water was a rarity outside of the most affluent of rich merchants' households even in such a major trading city as Totokanta, never mind a village as remote as Kink Hall.

So Orphen had opened the larger window for some fresh air and leaned

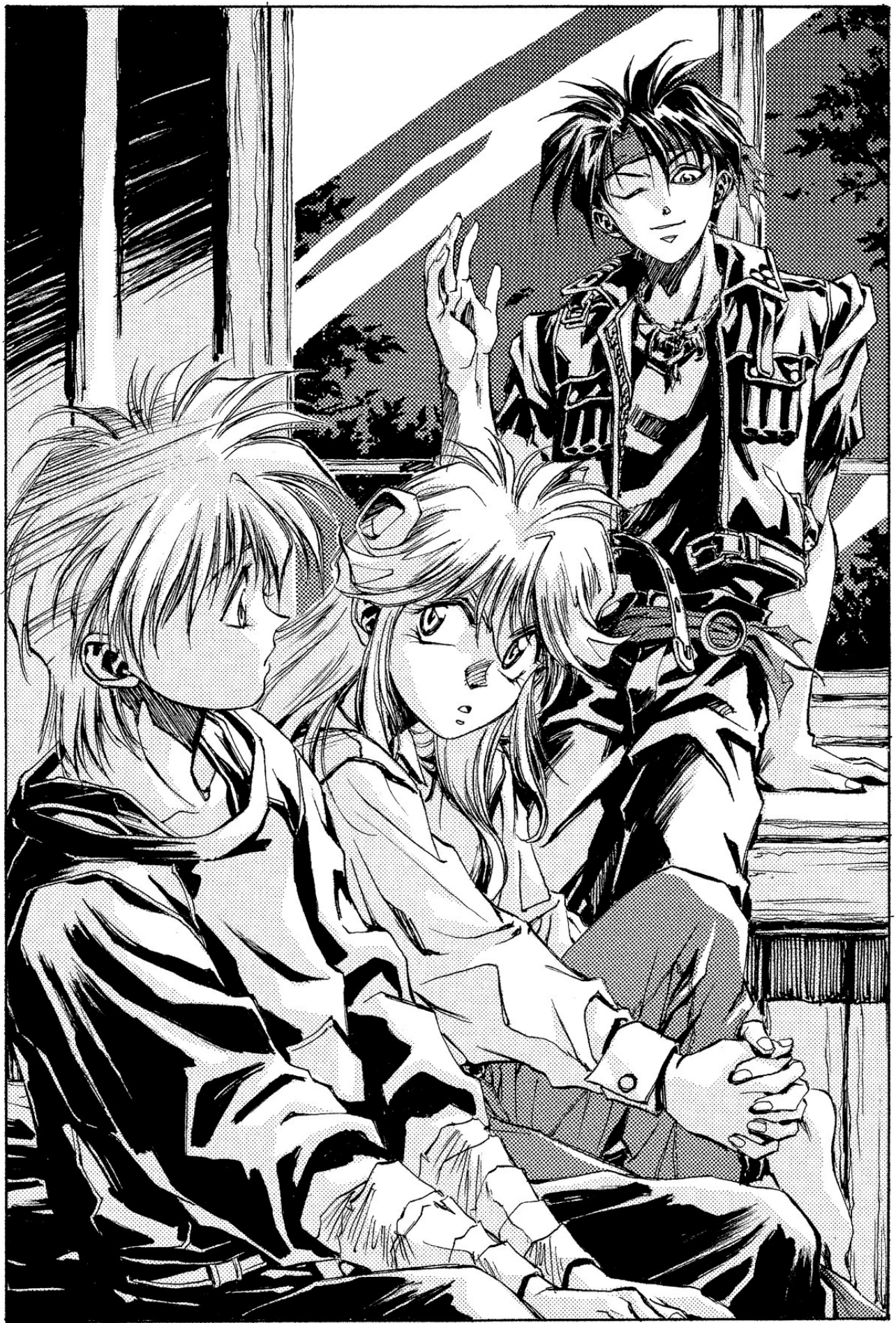
against the window ledge before setting out the task he had come up with for Majic that night.

“A test?”

“A proper one, with judges and everything,” chirped Claiomh, sitting on the bed furthest from Orphen while Majic sat perfectly between the two.

“It’s nothing too difficult. I just want you to sum up everything I’ve taught you so far as well as you can remember. Since Claiomh’s here now, I figured it’d be a good chance to see how well you’ve understood your lessons so far, and whether you could explain it to the average person as if they were your *own* student. And who knows, you might even learn something yourself from it.”

“Yup, so take it seriously,” said Claiomh like an overenthusiastic mother sitting in on their child’s school lessons.



“Well, alright...” said Majic, shooting a suspicious glance in Claiomh’s direction. Based just on that action, Majic didn’t seem too confident in his own abilities, but nevertheless, he began to recite what he had learned from his master as best he could sum it up. “So, when we talk about sorcery, we’re generally referring to one of seven specific types of the dark arts,” he began.

“Six of these forms of sorcery came about when six species of Dragons stole the ancient secrets of True Magic from the Gods, and each made it their own in their own ways, each according to their own needs. The seventh and final known form of sorcery came about when the Celestials mated with humans and produced offspring of mixed blood but generally human features, and... umm, Master?”

The younger boy called out, not sure where to take his explanation from here.

“What’s up?” replied Orphen with closed eyes, not moving a muscle.

“Can I check my notes here and there?”

“Nope.”

Orphen’s reply was so swift that it left Majic even more uncertain than when he had begun his explanation.

Nevertheless, the boy continued anyway. “Alright, well... The type of sorcery that we human Sorcerers can use falls under one of the seven categories of sorcery, whereas the Gods that have existed since the dawn of time are privilege to the powers of True Magic. While sorcery has its limitations, magic is supposedly limitless in what it can manipulate and what it can achieve. And even within the limitations of sorcery, there are those who are inherently more limited than their colleagues—”

“—Which we generally just call ‘talent’ within the same field,” added Orphen as he stepped away from the window ledge. It took him a moment to realize that he had even joined the conversation, whereupon he shook his head and turned back to Majic to reassure him. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to butt in there, it just sort of slipped out. Keep going.”

“Right... Well, anyway, that’s pretty much what we mean when we say that some Sorcerers are inherently more talented than others. Nobody yet knows

how or why things are like this, or what even causes this inherent gap in ability between people. It's totally unrelated to physical strength or stamina, and it has nothing at all to do with age. All we really know for certain is that practice can improve one's current mastery of sorcery, but only up to a certain point, after which a Sorcerer is considered to have *mastered* the art as best they ever can and will never grow any further beyond that point."

Claiomh brought her hand up to her mouth and sank deep into thought for a moment. She sat like this for so long that Majic was about to continue, but then suddenly opened her mouth just as he did and spoke over him.

"Couldn't you just, like, take a whole bunch of strong Sorcerers and try find some common points between them all? Like bloodline or personality or book-smarts or something?"

"Wouldn't you know it," said Orphen bitterly, "I once had the same thought when I was still starting out. I was one of the students in Childman's class — one of only seven in total — and even within the Tower of Fangs, Childman was considered both a genius and a hard-working beacon of strength, the likes of which the Continent had never seen before or since. It follows that his class was the elite of the elite, and so I once took me and my six fellow classmates into account, and what I found was..."

Orphen shrugged his shoulders dramatically before continuing. "We had virtually nothing in common at all. Our personalities, family backgrounds, sensibilities, and sorcerous capacities were all over the place. Other experts have tried, and I don't doubt they've all come to similar conclusions, otherwise we might've cracked the code by now. Anyway, Majic, I think even Claiomh's heard enough about this part for now, so let's skip ahead to the specific types of sorcery and where humans sit on that scale relative to the Dragon races."

"Alright... Well, umm, the type we humans can use is sometimes referred to as Vocal Sorcery, and it's among the top two or three most powerful types on the Continent," said Majic.

"That's giving it a bit *too* much credit," corrected Orphen.

"Okay," admitted Majic, "I just came up with that figure off the top of my head. The only point I was trying to make is that the sorcery available to

humans is one of the least weak of all the different kinds around.”

“If I were to rank the known forms of sorcery from the most powerful to least,” added Orphen, “I’d say that the War Dragons sit right at the top with their unparalleled Annihilation Sorcery.”

“*Annihilation?*” repeated Claiomh, her mouth agape.

“It’s exactly what it sounds like. The War Dragons — sometimes called the Steel Steeds, based on their appearance — stole the sorcery of Annihilation from the Gods. They wanted to know how to destroy, disassemble, or just plain exterminate any and all manner of things. That’s where they earned the War part of the name for themselves. The next most powerful after them would be the Weird Dragons, which most people these days now either call the ancestors of all Sorcerers, or more directly, the Celestials. Their Silent Sorcery was so flexible that we could never hope to live up to it. Right below them would be the Deep Dragons — the Abyssal Wolves — and their Shadow Sorcery. Far behind them would be us, the human Sorcerers,” finished Orphen, shrugging his shoulders again.

Majic turned to face Claiomh, continuing where he had left off. “What singles our human sorcery out as unique is that we use our voice as the medium. Basically, we need to *chant* our spells before they’ll take effect. Because we use our voices as a medium, our sorcery can never extend further than our voices reach, and the effects of our spells are inherently transient because there’s just no way to preserve one’s voice in the air the way one might carve letters into stone or steel. But then, even human Sorcerers can be further divided down into two types — Black Sorcerers like me or Master, and White Sorcerers, which are much less common.”

“Basically,” continued Orphen as he walked across the room, “Black Sorcerers control heat or sound or light — physical phenomena,” he stopped at the wall and turned around, “and White Sorcerers control things like the flow of time or the workings of the mind — metaphysical phenomena. To dumb it down as simply as possible, Black Sorcerers can manipulate the *seen*, while White Sorcerers manipulate the *unseen*. Those with a talent for White Sorcery are both rarer and more inherently powerful than those who can use Black Sorcery, which leads to them being highly treasured and generally hidden from the

world wherever and whenever possible.”

Having summed up what he had wanted to say, Orphen turned to face Claiomh once more and said, “You with us so far, Claiomh?”

The teenage girl responded with a loud snore.

“Don’t go to sleep! We’re having this test for *your* sake, too!” yelled Orphen angrily as he marched over to Claiomh’s bed and shook her back away.

She sat there for a moment, rubbing her eyes before complaining, “But this is so booooring.”

“Fucking hell... See, this is why I said it’d be pointless to teach you. What’d you *think* you’d be learning?”

Suddenly, Claiomh shot bolt upright and answered as seriously as she had done in days. “How to become a Sorceress overnight!”

“Hah! Then try going into a five-year coma!”

“Fine, then I will. Snoooore...”

“Cheeky little bitch...” grumbled Orphen, rising from the bed and throwing both arms into the air in a gesture of mock surrender. “You wanna know how you can be a Sorceress overnight, *Princess*? Well, it ain’t happening! First off, you gotta have a talent for it — like we said earlier — and if you don’t have that talent, then you can *never, ever* learn it. This has got jack shit to do with your personality, by the way, because it’s a problem of genetics. The only reason human Sorcerers exist is because they have Celestial blood in them. Which me and Majic do. And you don’t.”

“Snooooring!” yelled Claiomh, clearly upset.

On this point alone, though, Orphen wasn’t about to concede. “Throw all the temper tantrums you want, it won’t change the blood flowing through your veins! Look, nobody’s stopping you from learning *about* sorcery, but *the way sorcery itself works* will always be stopping you from ever using it. You got that? If you still wanna waste someone’s time trying to be a fucking bloodless human Sorceress, then waste somebody *else’s* time, just quit wasting *mine!*”

“Master...” mumbled Majic, curled up into a ball in case either Orphen or

Claiomh attacked him, “Why do you start yelling like an angry kid whenever you get into an argument?”

“Trust me, I’ll debate if the other person can. I’m deliberately lowering myself to her level so that she’ll understand my small words,” grumped Orphen, clearly fed up with it all.

But Majic seemed less frightened and more curious at Orphen’s outburst. “By the way,” the cowering boy said, “how did you know at a glance that I might have a talent for sorcery?”

“Ah. Well, y’see, *that* was a bit of an act. You can’t actually tell that sort of thing at a glance — no human or Sorcerer could, at least. If it were the kind of thing that manifested outwardly, then those Sorcerer-hating cults would have it so much easier.”

Orphen parked himself down next to Claiomh’s pillow and rested one hand on her head before retelling a story of days now long past.

“Your old man Bagup really starts fawning over his wife whenever he gets drunk, you know that? Wasn’t long after I met him that he started going on and on about her. Iris Lin, a bit of an infamous bandit, he’d always say. So, one time, he told this story about how a band of Sorcerers once tried to scout her for her peculiar *talents*. Nothing strange about that, Sorcerers will hire all sorts of folks to get a job done. But they don’t just *scout* people off the streets into their own ranks, so I figured there had to be more to it. And c’mon, you and Bagup look nothing alike, so I figured that if you took more after your mother then both you and she probably inherited enough of the same traits that it’d be worth trying to teach you a trick or two.”

While Orphen was busy recalling old Bagup, the big, muscular pirate of a landlocked bartender, Claiomh rolled over gently in bed with a solemn look on her face. “...So just because my parents weren’t dragons, I can’t cast spells now?”

“It sounds dumb when you put it like that, but basically, yeah,” Orphen nodded awkwardly. “Thing is, sorcery’s not really all it’s cracked up to be. It’s just one of many possible weapons, at the end of the day. And while you’re jealous that you can’t be a Sorcerer like the Orphen you look up to, I’m jealous

that I can't be like the Claiomh Everlasting traveling with me. It's human nature to want what you don't have, but it doesn't have to be that way once you're conscious of it."

Claiomh, now face-up, wondered aloud, "So I'm meant to just be proud of myself?"

"That makes it sound cheap, so no. Just keep your chin up. Sorcery isn't the kinda thing you want defining who you are, trust me," Orphen reassured his travel partner. "...What's got you backing away, Majic?"

"Oh, no, it's just, uh..." the boy raised both hands in front of his chest as if fearing for his own safety, "I never really pictured you *willingly* trying to cheer Claiomh up, so I thought you might be an enemy in disguise."

"You lookin' to lose a limb, bag boy?!" Orphen protested, his face red as a tomato. He snatched the pillow right out from under Claiomh's head and beat Majic with it repeatedly, successfully upsetting everyone in the room all at once.

—*Ting... Ting... Ting...*—

Orphen was roused from his sleep by the noise of a small bell jingling from somewhere. He opened his eyes slightly to try and ascertain where the noise was coming from, but it didn't seem to be coming *from* anywhere. The corners of his eyes were shrouded in darkness — not the darkness of the night, but more like a thin, dark mist eating away at his surroundings. The darkness continued to encroach further into his vision, accompanied by the sound of that ethereal bell. He could feel both of these things slowly eating away at him little by little...

"———!"

Instinctively realizing something was wrong, he leaped out of bed. His shirt was soaked with sweat. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest. An indescribable terror took over his whole body and mind.

What the hell... is going on...? he panicked, scanning the starlit bedroom. He turned to the other beds, where Majic and Claiomh were still sound asleep. Majic had his arms folded above the covers so that he could react more quickly

if anything happened, whereas Claiomh was sprawled out in a position that made one wonder how she hadn't fallen out of bed yet.

Orphen could tell that whatever was going on, it was only affecting him. He swiped up his jacket from the chair across the room, but instead of putting it on, he just clung to it tightly with his right hand and closed his eyes. He tried desperately to slow down his thoughts so that he could search for knowledge in his brain that might explain this queer sensation gripping him.

Every Sorcerer at the Tower of Fangs was made to undergo mental as well as physical training, and most were capable of controlling emotions such as fear and shutting them out in order to react more swiftly and efficiently. But when he tried to shut out the terror gripping him, he found...

I can't calm myself down...?

The harder he tried, the more he came to realize that his resistance was futile. Never mind calming himself down — his breath was growing ragged.

Is this... White Sorcery?!

As the strength was slowly sapped from his body, Orphen could feel his knees buckling beneath him. He gripped onto the back of the chair and struggled to keep himself upright. He was one of the rare few Sorcerers who had experienced White Sorcery firsthand. Normally, White Sorcerers were kept isolated from the world and strictly managed by the royal family, but Orphen had known a certain genius of the art since a young age, so he'd had plenty of chances to see and even experience what it was capable of with his own eyes — and his own mind.

That was how he knew. Whatever this was, it wasn't White Sorcery.

No... It's... something else... Something... more sinister... It feels like it's eating away not just at my mind... but my body... and even my... My...?

He struggled to think, but he could feel even his very sense of self being eaten away by whatever this *thing* was.

A chill ran down his spine. His whole body grew icy cold.

He grabbed the chair he was clinging to for balance and threw it at the roof

with all the force he could muster, screaming in desperation, “Don’t fuck with me!!”

His voice permeated every corner of the room, and with it, all of the mana pent up in his body. A shockwave exploded outwards from within his body, destroying all of the furniture in the room and shattering the windows. The closet was crushed into splinters, sending a shower of bent coat hangers scattering out all over the place. All three beds were flipped upright, throwing their sleeping occupants around in the storm of broken furniture. The broken glass from the windows rained down, the water pitcher fell to the ground, soaking the floor, and the gas light that had previously hung from the roof was crumpled up like a tin that someone had crushed up in their hand.

“Hyaaaaa!” someone screamed. It was most likely Majic, but Orphen didn’t even turn to check. All of his attention was diverted elsewhere.

The strange sensation had left Orphen’s body entirely, but he still had no idea where it had come from. He hastily scanned the room for any signs of an enemy, slipping his jacket on as he did so. With his jacket on, he whipped out his dragon pendant and threw it on around his neck.

“M-Master?! What’s going on?” asked Majic’s head, his body pinned beneath both of the destroyed beds. Claiomh had been flung off to the side, where she sat hugging her pillow, still half-asleep and rubbing her eyes.

“We’re... under attack,” replied Orphen with a hint of self-doubt. Even he wasn’t entirely sure what was going on. Were they really under attack? Was he sure that he hadn’t just awoken violently from a bad nightmare? The lack of any visible assailants would seem to suggest that this was the most likely scenario, but...

Yeah, right, he concluded.

“We’re under attack,” he repeated more firmly, gripping his pendant with his left hand.

When I screamed and wrung all my mana out with that shockwave, I definitely felt something else slipping out as well, thought Orphen, recalling the skin-crawling sensation of the otherworldly chill being ejected from his body. *Which means that whatever just attacked me... was probably ripped apart by my*

attack. But I can't let my guard down.

Orphen stood with his back to the window. He sharpened his gaze and took another look around the room. Sure enough, he could see a fine black mist floating idly in the shadows in the corners. Though it blended in with the darkness of the night, it was distinctly reforming back in the center of the room, taking shape before his very eyes. Right in the space between him and his companions.

—*THUMP, THUMP, THUMP!*—

“Keep it down!” came a thundering voice from outside the bedroom door. “Some of us are trying to sleep, you psychotic Sorcerer! If you’re not gonna shut the hell up, then you can evaporate to death in the moonlight!”

That voice could only possibly belong to Volkan, which meant that Dortin was probably standing just outside the room, too.

Meanwhile, inside the room, the mist had already gathered up into a sphere with a diameter of about fifty centimeters. As it gained more mass, it also began to take a different shape. There was no time to open the door and explain to the dwarf siblings what was going on, but even if there was, Orphen still didn’t *have* an explanation to give them.

While Orphen was busy worrying about the two new dead weights on the scene, the mist began to *talk*.

“YoU... LoOk... liKE... hIm...”

Startled, Orphen took half a step back. The mist-like thing grew taller. It grew slimmer. It grew *limbs*.

And then it spoke again. Whatever it was, it wasn’t just making noises... It was making *conversation*.

“yOU ArE... hIm...”

Volkan continued banging on the door, but Orphen barely even registered any background noise.

“It’s... *sentient*?”

Orphen stood dumbfounded. He could see straight through the human-

shaped figure to the other side of the room, and ended up staring Claiomh straight in the eyes. Claiomh noticed his gaze, too — and then noticed the thing that they were *both* staring straight through.

“Oh,” she said plainly, “it’s a ghost.”

A ghost... A specter... The spirit of a dead person...?

Orphen ran through the definition of the word in his head. Just hearing the word spoken aloud was like being slapped in the face. While he understood that this transparent, human-shaped, sentient thing seemed to fit the definition of the word, he refused to believe it.

“Like hell it is! Ghosts don’t exist!”

Hearing Orphen’s yell, the mist — the *ghost* — shrieked out with a voice like nails on a chalkboard. “YOu... aRe... PHONOGHOULOUS! I’Ve fINaLly fOUnd yoU!”

The spirit, while still transparent, had taken on the appearance of a thin young man wearing a spotlessly clean white coat, like that of a researcher. He looked timid at a glance, but had a sharp look in his eyes.

“Phonoghoulous?”

The moment the name left Orphen’s lips, Volkan kicked the door open. It swung open with tremendous force and appeared to slam into the ghost’s back.

“Shit!”

Orphen reflexively jumped to the side as the ghost flew past him with blinding speed. It had launched itself with such speed that it left a small shockwave in its wake, slamming straight into the wall next to the window.

...Or so Orphen had thought.

“What the...?”

Instead of crashing into the wall, the ghost passed straight through it. The only damage to the wall had been caused by Orphen’s own earlier attack.

“Wh-What the heck was *that*?”

Volkan and Dortin hobbled into the room, dragging the sleeves of their

human-sized pajamas behind them.

Majic was the first to respond. “It was... a ghost, I guess?”

“A *ghost*?” inquired Dorton doubtfully as he nudged his glasses up on his face with one finger. “Please don’t start talking about that haunted mansion now; you’re going to give my brother some dumb idea, like advertising us as ghost busters or something—”

“Hey,” said Orphen in hushed, serious tones, “shut the hell up, you lot,” before focusing his gaze towards the broken window. Everyone else focused their attention in the same direction.

The scenery outside was the exceedingly normal night view of Kink Hall Village, with the Aiden mountain range visible off in the distance. Stretching out between the village and the mountains was a vast forest, and the cries of nocturnal animals were the only sounds in the air. The night sky shone bright with stars.

Amongst all of this was something decidedly *abnormal*. A single large silhouette.

The creature peeked its cylindrical head in through the window hole — the *second floor* window hole. It scanned the room curiously with its slanted oval eyes, never once blinking all the while. The moonlight reflected off of its eyes... and off of its scales.

“Is that... a snake?” asked Majic. Orphen couldn’t even nod in response. The creature before them was undoubtedly a snake, but at the same time, there was something very un-snake-like about it.

Below its head — indeed, *past its neck* — it had a pair of human shoulders.

“It’s the Snake-Man!” screeched Volkan. From beneath his sleepwear, the hot-headed dwarf clumsily drew his broadsword.

Claiomh, on the other hand, passed out at the mere sight of the beast.

Orphen made his move first. “I release thee —”

But before he could chant his spell, the Snake-Man vanished off into the night. It didn’t seem to be preparing for an attack; it just simply *left*.

“Huh?”

Then, instead of a human-snake pouncing at them, something else came flying swiftly through the window.

“Whoa!”

Orphen was just barely able to avoid the object by kicking himself off his feet and landing on his backside. But he was the only person quick enough to react to the attack.

“Aaaahh!!” screamed Majic from behind. When Orphen turned to see what it saw, he found the arrow from a longbow sticking into one of the bed cushions right above Majic’s head.

“Oh, hell yeah!” yelled Orphen with renewed vigor.

His excitement may not have made much sense to any bystanders, but for Orphen, this was the best thing to happen all night. After all, bows and arrows were *human* weapons. Not the sorts of tools that ridiculous creatures like ghosts or human-snake mutants would come charging in with. And as long as the opponent was human, Orphen had absolute confidence that he could make short work of them.

In his excitement, Orphen leaped straight out of the broken window and made some swift acrobatic movements to scale the exterior of the building down to the ground. A part of his mind told him that jumping out in front of a target that was clearly trying to snipe him would normally be an extremely dangerous and stupid thing to do, but in the pitch black of night, it would take a first-rate sniper among snipers to hit a moving target.

He crashed to the ground, taking the shock of impact up through his knees and dispersing it throughout his body. He took in the sounds of the nocturnal insects as he scanned his surroundings for the new assailant.

If the one who just fired at me was a hired assassin, then they’re most likely positioned right around... thought Orphen, as he thrust his right hand out towards a thicket near the entrance of the inn. *The entrance would be a tactical spot for them to secure. Assuming that attack was to lure me out, then they’d definitely have someone hiding over there waiting to ambush me!*

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

The porch of the inn was instantly illuminated by a bright energy blast, setting the shrubbery ablaze in its wake. But before the beam could hit its target—

“Vanish!” came another voice, totally erasing Orphen’s attack — blazing shrubbery and all.

Someone just cast a spell... They’ve finally even hired Sorcerers to try and kill me now?

Orphen struck a defensive pose, but he quickly realized that there was no real need to be on guard. From the way the spell had been cast and the vague image that it had formed as it dissipated his restrained attack, he could tell that the enemy Sorcerer in question wasn’t particularly skilled. Most likely a drop-out who had been forced to do hired mercenary work for a living.

As expected, the mercenary Sorcerer fled from his hiding place under the shrubbery and made a run for it.

“Like hell you’re getting away from *me!*” he yelled after the man... *Men*, rather. When he noticed that the Sorcerer had been hiding amongst regular human assassins, he decided not to bother giving chase. If they were working in groups, it meant that chasing after them would lead him right into an ambush. Definitely not something Orphen was about to rush headlong into.

Still, the fact remained that he couldn’t just let them get away. Assuming they were more of the assassins hired by Ostwald, the fact that their night raid had coincided perfectly with the appearances of the ghost and the Snake-Man meant that he now had to confirm whether the two assaults had any relation to each other. Gathering information was now top priority.

Orphen stood where he was and raised both arms above his head, crossing them over one another while inhaling deeply.

“I call upon thee, Sisters of Destruction!”

With this chant to enforce his mental image, he slammed both hands to the ground with tremendous force.

A deep rumbling sound reverberated throughout the ground in all directions,

along with a localized but fairly powerful earthquake.

“Urk!”

“Gwuoh!”

A pair of archers let out grunts of pain as they were knocked down from their perches atop some of the sturdier trees a few meters away. Both fell to the ground upside down and landed painfully on their backs.

I should be able to get enough information out of just one of them, Orphen decided with a satisfied internal smirk before making his way ever-cautiously over to the collapsed men.

His first order of business was to knock out the man nearest to him to prevent his escape, which he did so by delivering a relentlessly swift kick to the man’s solar plexus with his steel-toed boots. After making sure the first was unconscious, he made his way over to the second would-be assassin laying crumpled up on the ground.

Orphen bent down on one knee and gripped the groaning man by his collar, dragging him upright so that they were face-to-face. “I already know that you lot were hired by Ostwald. Xanadu Ostwald, that shitty moneylender from Totokanta,” he declared with absolute certainty.

The long-haired assassin hung limp in Orphen’s grasp, drenched in sweat from the feeling of intimidation overwhelming him, but still gripping his longbow despite knowing it would provide him no protection in this situation. Not once did the man so much as open his mouth.

Orphen let out an exasperated sigh. “Yeah, I get it. You’re a pro assassin, after all. There’s no way you’d just go around blabbing your employer’s name every time you fucked up, otherwise you wouldn’t last long in the business due to a shitty, unreliable reputation. Even a third-rate grunt like you has at least *that* much sense, I suppose.”

This was the main, decisive difference between hired assassins and common thugs. One of them acted on a mission and had received at least some physical and mental training for it — including resistance under torture — whereas a common thug would be begging for mercy right about now.

“In that case, I’ll change my question. What the fuck was that ghost, and where’d the freaky-ass Snake-Man come from?”

“Gh-Ghosts...?” stuttered the assassin, clearly taken aback by the abrupt nonsensical question.

Orphen could tell that the man was genuinely confused, which only made the need to press further all the more urgent.

“You heard me. Right before you opened fire on us, we were assaulted by a ghost in our own room.”

“Th’hell you on about, man? We were just—”

The man had apparently broken his left shoulder when he fell from the tree, so he gestured towards the bow in his right hand with his eyes.

“Our plan was to jump y’all while youse were asleep, then when ya moved close to the window we was ta snipe ya frum there. When I saws ya at the window, I thought our guys had made dere move, so I went an’ did my bit... Shit, did they ditch tha plan without tellin’ us?”

The assassin bit his lip in frustration. He wasn’t a hard man to read, and Orphen could tell that he didn’t seem to be lying, so he continued in order to try and extract more information from him.

“Oh, we were jumped while we were asleep, alright,” Orphen continued bitterly, “just not by *your* guys, who were still hiding out around the porch. The thing that came after us was some kinda... *ghost*. Shit, if that ghost wasn’t part of your plans, then where the hell did it —”

“Waaaaah!!”

While Orphen had been busy interrogating the long-haired assassin, the situation behind him had taken an even stranger turn than anything before.

Orphen turned around to find that the first assassin was laying on his back, his mouth wide open as he screamed out in painful desperation. The reason for his pain was clearly apparent... and clearly abnormal. *Something* was gripping his head with inhuman strength. Something pale... and hand-shaped. Hand-shaped, but with large kitchen knives for fingers. From each of the knife-like fingers

extended a length of steel wire, which had been wrapped around the poor assassin's head completely.

The fingers tightened their grasp around the man's head, covering his eyes, and then gradually more and more of his face as it tightened its grasp. Each time the hand squeezed, blood spurted from the man's face. It dug horrifically into the man's skull, like squeezing the juice out of a fruit.

The man's whole body convulsed in pain as *The Hand* squeezed rivulets of blood out of every orifice on his head.

"Urk... Urrgwaaaaaah!"

The man let out one final death cry as The Hand clenched its grip right up into a fist — shattering everything it held with a noise like a vase being shattered. For just an instant, a splurt of bodily fluids that Orphen didn't even want to *know* the origins of splattered all around the area where the man's head had once been, shards of cracked and shattered white bone mixed in with the meaty pulp of what was once a human head — not that one would be able to tell that it had ever been a head in its current state.

Its job apparently done, *The Hand* sank into the ground and vanished without a trace.

"Wah, awawawawaaahh!"

This scream came not from the assassin's partner, but from Orphen himself as he backed away from the horrific sight. It took all of his self-control to keep the vomit rising up his throat from pouring out of his mouth, and he struggled to keep his emotions in check so that he didn't break down into a hysterical mess.

Now, Orphen had seen people die plenty of times in the past — but nothing so horrible, so disgusting, so inhumane, so *abnormal* as what had just occurred before his very eyes.

Driven by some primal fear, he backed away from the scene on all fours until he felt his back hit against something. At first, he thought it was a tree, but then he realized that it was strangely warm.

"...Eh?"

Still collapsed on the ground, Orphen timidly craned his head backwards to get a look at what it was that he had backed up into. What he saw was a tall, pitch-black figure wielding a bulky dagger in its right hand.

“Shit! Not today...!” he yelled, twisting his body upright in a panic to face his opponent as he drove his hand towards the figure’s throat with his fingers perfectly straight like a blade. He had instinctively gone in for the kill, but the figure parried his attack with their dagger.

Orphen didn’t relent for a second, driven purely by panic and adrenaline as he struggled to stay alive even a moment longer. He stuck as close to the person as he could to cut off any attacks from their dagger. He wrapped his left arm around their right arm to lock it in place, gripped the back of their head in the same movement, and tried to thrust his left thumb into their left eye.

But when his thumb missed its target, both of them stopped moving completely.

What’s going on now...? Orphen wondered, completely confused.

Still entangled with his enemy, their face finally came into view — obscured by the darkness of the night, however. Some sort of crazed instinct in the back of Orphen’s head told him that he should close his eyes in this situation.

But why? Orphen’s instincts had saved him countless times and so he was inclined to trust them, but to close his eyes in the middle of a duel to the death?

Hang on... Is this really still a duel to the death? Is this person my enemy?

Giving in to this instinct welling up from some stranger, unfamiliar part of his mind, Orphen made a decision.

He closed his eyes.

Once he had closed his eyes, the situation changed from a duel-to-the-death to something completely different. He relaxed his body, and the person he was entangled with caressed his back gently with her hand — he could tell that it was a woman’s hand even through his clothes. Then, the woman patted him on the hip and separated from him.

Orphen opened his eyes only to find that his sense of panic had totally

dissipated, and that he had calmed down completely. He felt utterly relaxed and even at peace for the first time since the bizarre incidents had begun occurring that night. It was almost as if he'd had a pleasant splash of cold water on his face to bring him back to reality. Which, in truth, wasn't too far off the mark.

When he went over what had just happened in his head, he realized that the woman before him had just kissed him.



“...Philietta?” he blurted out dumbly.

Indeed, it was the woman Philietta standing before him. She was licking her lips, as if savoring the taste of their kiss with a strange little smirk on her face.

“Those were some incredible moves you tried to use just now. Was that some martial art that you picked up at the Tower of Fangs?”

“Martial art?” repeated Orphen blankly. “Oh, that? That’s no martial art. It’s... nothing nearly as respectable as that...”

His tone of voice had turned weak, and his face was bright red, partly because he felt like he’d slipped up and mistakenly shown something shameful that he shouldn’t have, but more because he was embarrassed that his heart was beating so fast right now, and that he couldn’t quite get it under control as well as he usually could.

“Those were, umm... moves developed purely for assassination. I’m... honestly surprised that I even remember any of those skills.”

“Hmm~?” Philietta scratched the side of her head with the base of her knife before continuing, “So, you’ve used those moves to assassinate people before then, have you?”

“As if,” said Orphen, denying the very idea, wiping sweat from his brow all the while. “It’s just something that was drilled into me while I was at the Tower. It’s not something I’d normally resort to. Not the best form of self-protection around, swinging around your hands like that... Wait, hands...?” he paused for a moment, suddenly recalling what had made him so flustered in the first place. “That hand! This, disembodied *hand* came out of the ground and grabbed one of the assassins!”

“Crushed his head into paste, right? Speaking of which, shouldn’t you be more worried for the other one? Wouldn’t it be bad if he were claimed by The Hand, too?” said Philietta, flipping her raven-dark hair over her shoulder, making it seem to blend into the darkness of the night itself.

Orphen suddenly recalled the other man and turned to look where he had been collapsed on the ground mere moments ago, but found that he had long since fled the scene. He couldn’t even sense the man’s presence anywhere

nearby.

“Ah, shit!” he swore, swinging his fist out like beating a wall in the air as he cursed his own carelessness.

“Oh, well. It’s not like you could’ve done much in that situation, anyway,” muttered Philietta.

With their conversation seemingly having hit a bit of a dead end, the inn’s front door suddenly burst open.

“Orphen!”

“Master!”

Claiomh and Majic came dashing over towards them, but Claiomh froze in her tracks when she noticed Philietta standing there.

“What the heck just happened?” asked Majic, to which Orphen could only raise his arms to show that he had absolutely no idea whatsoever. Quite frankly, even Orphen *himself* had *absolutely no idea* what had just happened. Nothing seemed to fit together, and in fact, there were now so many pieces that he wasn’t entirely sure if *any* of them were connected to each other in the slightest.

Orphen shot a glance in Philietta’s direction and found her doing the smart thing with all these young people suddenly on the scene. She was covering the remains of the dead assassins with black sheets that she had pulled seemingly out of nowhere.

Relieved that the younger ones wouldn’t have to witness that gore, he turned to face Claiomh, who was desperately trying to fix her bed hair by brushing it with her fingers. “What the heck were you thinking, just jumping out of the second floor window like that?! It’s suicide to try and take on that many assassins on your own without my support!”

Orphen waved his hand as if to say “Yeah, yeah,” before placing that same hand on Claiomh’s shoulder and turning her around to walk her back into the inn. He wanted to avoid letting her see all the blood splattered around the area as much as possible.

“So hey, whatever happened to those brainless bricks-for-brains brothers, anyway?” he asked Majic, who responded with a shrug of his shoulders.

“The dwarfs? They were running around the room calculating damage costs or something. I’m pretty sure they’re gonna try and pin the whole thing on us and get us to pay up, hoping to score some of the profits.”

Orphen let out a heavy sigh, which was when Philietta approached him from behind.

“So how are you gonna explain this to the village guard?”

“Think you could report it to them for me? I’d have no idea where to even start. And besides...” Orphen paused and gave Philietta a pointed look. “...I’d say you seem rather more *informed* as to whatever went on tonight, given that you’re not even shaken in the slightest.”

Philietta took Orphen’s thinly-veiled accusation in stride, without so much as a change in expression. She merely slipped her dagger back into the holster built into her body suit and turned around to leave. But not without a parting comment.

“By the way, Orphen?”

“What now?”

Orphen continued leading Claiomh down the corridor, not wanting to let her back outside for any reason, when Philietta drew very close to Orphen and whispered into his ear. “You might wanna wipe that off before you walk back into a bright room.”

“Wipe *what* off?”

“You’ve got lipstick on your face,” Philietta said, giggling as Orphen’s face lit up brighter than any of the gas lamps in the building. Feeling like he’d just been thrust into a bottomless pit of despair, he panicked and rushed to wipe his lips on the back of his hand, hopefully before Claiomh had noticed it. He could only pray that she hadn’t.

Chapter III: The Fools Of Rumor

We're probably screwed, thought Orphen as he took another look over the trashed room. The closet was destroyed beyond recognition, the floor was littered with bent candlesticks, the wallpaper was burnt in places, and the door that Volkan had kicked open was hanging awkwardly off its hinges.

The money he'd have to shell out for repairs even if he *was* able to fix some of it up with sorcery was still enough to make his head spin just speculating about it. If worse came to worst, he might even have to suck it up and prepare to see his face plastered on wanted posters as he skipped town and ran as far away as he possibly could. He honestly did consider this as potentially one of his options.

That was why, when he went to report the situation to the local government office the next morning, he was completely taken aback by what came out of the elderly government official's mouth.

"Must've been real hard on you. How much compensation would you and your group be looking for from this incident?"

"Whuh?" was the approximate noise that came out of Orphen's half-gaping mouth before he quickly corrected his posture. After having prepared himself to hear the worst news possible, learning that *he* was to be the one in receipt of 'compensation' had completely thrown him for a loop. He even wondered if he'd just misheard what the man was asking him for a moment there.

How much compensation are we looking for? he repeated inside his head. *Not how much we have to pay them?*

Orphen asked the man — as naturally as possible — just to make sure he hadn't misheard.

"Oh, well, I'm afraid this is the first time anything like this has ever happened to me. Have you dealt with situations like this before?"

"Hmm... Well..."

The government official seemed to be trying to recall something, rubbing his white mustache as he got lost in thought. He seemed like a nice, polite man. He wore a brown waistcoat, and in one corner of the office, Orphen spied a wide-rimmed hat on a hanger. The only real furniture in the room was the wooden desk that the old man was using to lean his frail elbows on. From the looks of him, Orphen assumed that the man was a retired policeman from the city who had been dispatched to this quiet little village just to keep the public order all the way out here where it was highly unlikely anything big would ever happen.

After a long pause, the old man finally spoke up. “That’s right, there was a similar incident around three years ago. A lady was staying at the very same inn, but was awoken in the middle of the night by the ghost of a Sorcerer. She went rushing into the church in the middle of the night begging for protection from the evil spirit. As I recall, the compensation she was given at the time was...”

The money itself didn’t amount to much, but the *story* that Orphen had just heard was far more valuable than any compensation because of the implications.

This isn’t the first time that ‘ghost’ has gone about haunting people, he noted. Crossing his arms, he tried to recall more specifics about the strange phenomenon. *Come to think of it, when he saw me he called me ‘Phonoghoulous...’*

It was no good. He desperately needed more information. But who might have the answers he needed to complete the puzzle?

The elderly government official began questioning Orphen about the assassins that had been killed by ‘The Hand’ during the same incident, but Orphen was already planning his next move in his head even as he answered the man’s questions as best he could.

Looks like I’m gonna have to track down Philietta and ask her to explain a little bit more about just what the hell’s going on in this village.

When Orphen left the government official’s office, he found Majic just outside, waiting for him. The boy was leaning against a small wall by the side of the road, and his face lit up when he saw his teacher emerge from the building.

“Master!” he yelled excitedly, rushing over to Orphen’s side.

“What’s with you?” asked Orphen with a flippant gesture of the hand. “I thought I told you to wait back at the inn. Why’re you all the way out here? Did something happen?”

“Oh, umm, well, y’see...” mumbled Majic, averting his gaze, “It was getting a bit, err, uncomfortable to hang around there any longer...”

“...?” Orphen stood there wordlessly with a puzzled look on his face.

Majic sighed and tried to explain what had happened since Orphen had left. “That Philietta lady showed up and said she had business with you. When I told her you were out, she took a seat in the cafeteria to wait for you to get back... But, well...”

“Oh, come on. Out with it, already.”

“Claiomh’s there with her. For some reason the minute Claiomh saw Philietta in the dining room, she went over and sat on the opposite side of the table, and the two started glaring really intensely at each other without saying a word.”

“...Yeah, even *I’m* a bit hesitant to go back now.”

Fully grasping the gravity of the situation, Orphen and Majic sighed in perfect unison.

Considering all the commotion that had gone on the previous night, the inn’s grounds were remarkably peaceful. The only sign that anything had even happened was the thick layer of cardboard covering the inside of the destroyed window of Orphen’s old room. Apart from that, everything was virtually as it was when they had first arrived.

When Orphen walked through the inn’s front entrance, he was met with the atmosphere of a deserted house. Further in, when he located the cafeteria, he found exactly what he had feared.

Philietta sat at the table right in the center of the room in her usual leather bodysuit. Right across from her on the other side of the table was Claiomh, looking utterly defeated. Quite literally.

Claiomh's cheek was slightly swollen, and the top button on her blouse looked like it had almost been ripped right off. Then Orphen caught sight of an upturned chair next to the table — all the signs he needed in order to deduce that the place had been a veritable battleground until just a short while ago.

As Orphen stepped into the dining room and made his presence known, Philietta merely smiled sweetly without even getting up from her seat. Claiomh, on the other hand, spun around to face him, before hastily covering the wound on her face with her brilliant blond hair as best she could.

"I swear, you just never learn..." Orphen muttered, but before he could even admonish the girl, she leapt from her chair in protest.

She glared at Orphen and yelled simply, "You big dummy!" before doing a heel turn and dashing up the stairs. Orphen had no idea what had happened while he was gone, and could only stare blankly after her as her figure vanished to the upper floor.

From behind, he could hear Majic saying "There was no reason for her to get angry at *you*, was there, Master?"

"I wonder about that," said Philietta. She rubbed the hilt of her dagger in its sheath built into her suit with an indomitable smile on her face, as though she were giving Orphen a hint.

"What're you trying to say?" he asked as he casually made his way over to Philietta's table.

Philietta cast Orphen a sidelong glance and explained, "Personally, I think she has every right to be furious with you. After all, you've been hiding the truth from her, haven't you?"

Orphen silently picked up the chair that Claiomh had kicked over when she stormed off in a fuss and sat himself down across the table from Philietta.

"When I told her that I was a Continent-renowned Sorcerer-hunter, and that I had been hired to take your life, her eyes almost popped right out of her head."

As Majic heard this very same thing for the first time, Orphen could hear him backing away and bumping into the corner of one of the tables behind him. Orphen held up one hand to signal to Majic that Philietta was perfectly

harmless right now, then made a bitter smile as he pictured what must have happened next.

“Knowing Claiomh, I’ll bet she didn’t even try to run for her life. Hell, from the looks of things, she probably made the first move.”

“Indeed she did. She picked up a chair and swung it right at me without a second thought. It all happened so fast that I reflexively knocked it out of her hand and landed a punch on her. I do feel quite bad about attacking a young girl like that, you know?”

“For fuck’s sake. It was *her* who attacked *you* of her own accord. Just because she got bested by a professional killer doesn’t give her the right to snap at *me* over it.”

Orphen’s words made Philietta laugh quite heartily. “That’s not why she’s angry with you, you silly man. The little lady only did any of that because she was *worried* about you. Just picture it — an ordinary little girl with no real combat training to speak of is trying to protect *you*, a man who is arguably one of the most skilled Sorcerers on the entire Continent. Don’t you find that quite adorable?”

“...I guess, when you put it like that.”

The way the conversation was going reminded Orphen that his disciple was still in the same room, cowering in the corner ever since the words ‘Sorcerer hunter’ had come up in conversation. He decided to free the poor lad from one hell into an arguably less nerve-wracking one.

“Majic, go after Claiomh. See if you can’t cheer her up a little.”

Majic almost leaped out of his skin before raising both hands in front of his chest in staunch refusal. “No way, no chance! That’s suicide!”

“Just get going already,” Orphen repeated, before adding some reasoning that Majic wouldn’t be able to refute. “If that *ghost* thing from yesterday shows up again, then it’d be dangerous to leave Claiomh on her own.”

“...I feel like it’d be just as dangerous for me to be alone in the same room with Claiomh when she’s that upset, though...” the boy grumbled, reluctantly heading up the stairs as his teacher had told him to.

This left only Orphen and Philietta in the dining room. Since it wasn't even noon yet, none of the flames on the ovens had been lit, and the room was lit only by the dull morning sunlight pouring in through the windows. Orphen sat in front of the female assassin and locked eyes with her once more.

"Before we go any further, I need to confirm something."

"Whatever could that be?" Philietta responded in the form of a question, keeping that smile on her face unique to women hiding their true intentions from people.

Orphen leaned back in his chair. "Are you an enemy? Or an ally?"

"I do suppose that depends. On what criteria are we basing the requirements for 'ally' against 'enemy'?" Philietta poked teasingly.

Orphen wasn't a fan of roundabout wordplay like this, but he didn't hate it so much that he could boorishly just brush it off entirely.

"The criteria that separates them is whether or not I should blast your head off your body here and now, or whether I'll regret having done that later on."

"I would much rather keep my head attached, I suppose," replied Philietta with a little giggle. "Alright then, call me an ally. At the very least, I'm not going to slit your throat in the night, so rest easy knowing that. And as for information, I'll supply you with as much as you need."

"Alright, good to hear. Then you can start by spilling absolutely everything. Right now."

"Oh my. Impatient, aren't we? Wouldn't you rather keep me company with some conversation for a little longer?"

"Not interested."

"I can see that you're not very fond of me... Am I really such a bad kisser?"

"Oh, cram it," grumbled Orphen with narrowed eyes.

Philietta kept smiling as though she were having fun with their exchange, though Orphen couldn't fathom what was so amusing about the mess he'd gotten himself wrapped up in. The lady assassin ran her hand through her raven-black hair before resting her elbow on the dining table and leaning

forward slightly.

“Alright, to begin with... I’m afraid you won’t be able to meet with my sponsor face-to-face. There’s a good reason for this, although seeing as how you’re already clearly suspicious of me, I doubt you’ll believe what I’m about to say.”

“In other words, you’re not planning to tell me everything from start to finish, after all.”

“...Yes, I’m afraid it’s probably best if you think of it that way.”

Orphen had only said that sarcastically, so he was taken aback slightly when Philietta answered sincerely like that.

Then, he noticed a shadow cast over Philietta’s normally-impenetrable expression. When he saw her looking like that, he found himself recalling some of the more far-fetched rumors about the infamous Philietta the Fools’ Hound.

The lady in question opened her bright red lips and began to tell a tale so far-fetched that any sane person would doubt its credibility.

“You see, my sponsor... is already dead. He died a long time ago. I was the one who killed him. But... he’s still with us, even now. In this very village.”



“That man is just impossible!”

The second Claiomh stepped into her room, all of her anger erupted like an active volcano. She lifted up the pillow from her bed, tossed it into the air, and then executed a flawless roundhouse kick which sent the poor pillow flying into the wall with a dissatisfying *plurf* noise before it fell to the floor, even more lifeless than before.

Because Orphen had trashed the previous room, they had been moved into a different bedroom. One that clearly hadn’t been intended for guests. This was obvious from the fact that there was no decorative wallpaper or any of the fancy high-class furniture that one might expect from an inn this size.

Claiomh picked the pillow up off the floor and this time threw it up in front of herself. She leaped into the air and chased after it with a dropkick. Rather than a kick though, her leg came down on the pillow like a sword slashing into it. The

force sent the pillow crashing into the ground where it bounced lightly back up, which Claiomh then fell right down on top of with her buttocks.

This wasn't the sort of move that just anyone could pull off in a split-second like that.

Claiomh sat there on the pillow, staring at the wall and grumbling to herself. "He thinks he can just do everything by himself..."

Just then, she heard a voice from outside the open window. "Gather around, men!"

It was unmistakably Volkan's voice.

Claiomh's frown unfurled, her curiosity piqued. She stood up from the pillow and walked over to the window, leaning on the windowsill to get a better view at what was going on outside. She could only make out the back of Volkan's head, but he stood proudly and in high spirits. Dortin, however, stood a few steps behind his older brother, his shoulders slumped as usual.

Come to think of it, those two've known Orphen a lot longer than I have, Claiomh thought to herself.

That was when she realized that, apart from the sizable debt they owed to Orphen, Claiomh knew absolutely nothing about the dwarf siblings.

And I don't know much more about Orphen than I do about them... she realized.

A gentle breeze blew in through the window and lifted her silky blond hair up with it, which she held down silently with one hand. She focused her attention again on the dwarf brothers standing outside just below the bedroom window.

Five children were lined up in front of Volkan and Dortin. They were all about ten years old at most, and Claiomh noticed that the boy on the far right was the one who had carried their bags up to their room the other day.

Volkan spoke up again, sounding about as arrogant as he ever had done. "At ease, men! It humbles me greatly to welcome you new voluntary recruits into the proud ranks of Volkan's Theater, which until now has struggled with lack of funds and manpower!"

“The word ‘humble’ doesn’t mean what you think it means... and they’re not men, they’re all just kids,” mumbled Dortin, who got a swift crack across the head from Volkan’s sheathed sword for his trouble.

“Now, where was I? Ah yes! All of you are here today because you have sympathized and resonated with our lofty ambitions, upon which we have tirelessly strived to build the reputation of ‘Volkan’s Theater: from the people, for the people,’ engaging in works both business and volunteer! However, as you have seen, it becomes more difficult by the day to preserve the equilibrium upon which this foundation is built—”

Claiomh had to press her hand to her lips to stifle her laughter. The children couldn’t make heads or tails of what Volkan was trying to say — if, indeed, anything at all. They shot each other confused looks as Volkan continued unabashed, blissfully unaware that his nonsensical speech was complete nonsense to everyone’s ears.



Dortin heaved a dramatic sigh, which Volkan also failed to notice, too wrapped up in how impressive he must have thought he looked in that moment.

“In other words! We must eliminate all obstacles as though they’re threatening to stuff our chimneys to death, and cure any illnesses before we even catch them! To these ends, I will now explain where our future course of actions shall take us—”

Claiomh shut the window and turned her back to it, leaning against the window ledge with a light sigh.

“Not a care in the world, that lot.”

Then again, I was basically running around all carefree just like that until very recently, she realized.

When had she changed? What had changed her? *Had* she even changed at all? Claiomh couldn’t really say for sure. All she knew was that she was now thinking and feeling things that she never used to think or feel back when she lived with her family in Totokanta.

I wonder if I’m still just ‘luggage’ in Orphen’s eyes... she thought, turning her gaze to the ceiling. I get it, I know he has to act like he’s responsible for us. I mean, me and Majic are both still minors, after all. If anything, it’d be weirder for him to treat us like his equals. But still...

She spoke the rest aloud in hushed tones. “I could do just fine as Orphen’s partner, if only he’d let me be part of the team.”

While Claiomh had been raised in a well-to-do family, she was by no means sheltered. She had gone to school in the commoners’ district, most of her friends were the rough or sporty types, and she just generally didn’t *feel* as sheltered as Orphen treated her. No matter what happened, she was sure that — even putting her exceptional physical abilities aside — she could make swift and wise decisions no matter how chaotic things got. Plus, she knew how to use a sword. More than any of that, though, she was convinced that no matter how dire things got, no matter who their enemy was, Claiomh was the one person in the world who would absolutely never betray Orphen. That, she could say with

complete confidence.

All that considered, even if I'm not Orphen's equal... I'm at least worthy enough to be called his partner. If there's one thing I'm missing, it'd have to be...

—Knock, knock.—

The person at the door opened it without waiting for Claiomh's response. "Claiomh... I'm coming in, alright?"

"You're already in," she said, glaring at the boy standing in the doorway.

The door swung fully open, but Majic didn't dare to actually enter the room.

If there's one thing I'm missing... Claiomh repeated to herself, jealousy welling up within her as she continued glaring at Majic. *Then it's that I can't use sorcery. Yup, that's gotta be it!*

Majic stood as still as he could, like he were face-to-face with a deadly predator whose sight was based on movement.



"...This is gonna be a pain in the ass now."

A man with black hair almost completely covering his eyes muttered to his group of companions, all gathered together in the woods some several kilometers outside of the village proper. He looked like he was somewhere in his forties, but in fact, he hadn't even turned thirty yet. It was most likely his stubble and serious expression adding a decade to his appearance. He wore a lead gray combat armor over another outfit of similarly dark colors, the type favored by Sorcerers. From his hip hung a one-handed saber; his scarred hand gripping the hilt anxiously.

The scar on the back of his hand looked like a different organism had latched itself onto him, which made the others try to avoid staring at it too much.

From among the group of men who had been gathered together from far and wide for this single assassination request, one of them spoke up.

"Whaddya mean, Mister Stark?"

"What I mean," the black-haired Sorcerer called Stark replied, "is that now

we've failed to kill the target, he knows we're still out here. He's gonna be on his guard against us from now on, which is gonna make it hard for us to move. And it's not like we can just hide out in a remote little village like this while we wait for him to let his guard down — We'd stick out like a sore thumb."

"What if... What if he really is from the Tower of Fangs after all?" muttered one of the other assassins fearfully.

Stark turned to face the cowering killer. "So what if he is?"

"You're still gonna take him on?"

"I'll admit, he's one damn skilled Sorcerer," said Stark, taking his hand away from the hilt of his sword for a moment. He raised this hand up to his face and picked out a stray beard hair that had been bothering him out of the corner of his eye. "Maybe even skilled enough to be from the Tower. Problem is, I can't see anyone *that* skilled staying totally unknown for as long as this guy supposedly has. I'm willing to bet 'Orphen' is a fake name — I mean come on, what kind of a name is *Orphen*, anyway? He clearly didn't even put much thought into it. Which makes me wonder how an idiot who can't even come up with a proper fake name could keep his past so heavily concealed."

"He sounds plenty dangerous t'me just 'cuz of that."

"Not really. All he has is rough, unpolished power — He's basically still a kid with no real world experience on the battlefield. We're talking about a guy who buckled at the knees when *one of his enemies* died — a mistake that cost him a valuable hostage. See?" explained Stark, shooting said long-haired ex-hostage a knowing wink.

It was the very same man that Orphen had knocked out of a tree and tried to interrogate. His right arm was wrapped up in bandages, broken from when he had hit the ground. Perhaps because he'd experienced all this firsthand, he didn't seem to agree with what Stark had just said.

"You can only say that 'cause you're a Sorcerer, too. For normal humans like us, even a brat like that is—"

The man abruptly stopped speaking mid-sentence and convulsed violently exactly once.

The others all turned their gazes to him, suddenly wary of an unknown *something*. Before them all, he opened his mouth and began making noises like a ventriloquist testing out their puppet.

“AaaAAh, AAaAaAH,” he vocalized, holding his hand to his throat. “i’VE FoUNd yoU!”

The other assassins were quick to react. Every last one of them backed away swiftly while reaching for their weapons. Stark was the only one who didn’t bother with his sword, instead pointing his index finger at the man and yelling a single word.

“Open!”

This single, vague word must have meant absolutely nothing to anyone who heard it. It was such a general, ordinary word that one might use mid-sentence that nobody could guess its effects from just that alone, reasoned Stark. And in the very next moment, it all made itself clear as the spell activated.

—Frk!—

The sound of something like paper being ripped was followed by a gaping wound that manifested on the long-haired man’s body, stretching all the way from his left shoulder to his right hip. A single spurt of blood came pouring out from the area around his heart, spilling out like water from a bucket. He had died the moment the spell had taken effect; painlessly. His broken right arm fell limp, and his corpse fell down on its back.

But from the corpse... From the wound, a thick black mist poured out. Having emerged from the man’s corpse, it began to take on its own human form once more.

“Wh-What the hell?!” screamed one of the assassins, a man with long, slender limbs. He held his dagger aloft in shaking hands.

The black mist had taken the figure of a young man in a white coat, and was staring straight at Stark, ignoring all of the others.

“I’VE... FOund yOu... SORceReR! yOU ARe... PHONOGHOULOUS!”

“Phono-*who*?” was all Stark could say in response.

“PHONOGHOULOUS! YoU... wIlL Pay... foR wHaT... yoU HAVe dOnE!”

“Blast off!” chanted Stark, ignoring the strange figure’s words. From his outstretched hands shot a single bolt of lightning, one which pierced through the mist-man’s chest. It scattered his figure momentarily, but the mist reformed a moment later, seemingly having taken no damage whatsoever.

“Shit!” swore Stark as he lowered his stance. The other assassins had similar luck when they charged at the mist with their weapons. Swords, daggers, and arrows all passed through the mist-man harmlessly.

“It’s a ghost!” one of the men yelled.

“Urf...” said another. This second man hadn’t reacted to the ghost, though. Instead, his gaze was fixed on the bloodstain leaking out through the shirt on his chest.

“Ow!” yelled a man from somewhere else. It was just a yelp of pain, but that alone told Stark everything he needed to know. His suspicions were confirmed when he saw *something* sinking into the ground just behind the man’s leg, which had been completely severed below the knee. The thing looked like *a hand covered in knives*.

—Pew!—

A shrill noise rang throughout the air. A man’s head fell from his body, decapitated in an instant.

“What the fuck is going on...?” wondered Stark aloud. He understood instinctively that his sorcery was useless here — he didn’t even know *what* the enemy was, never mind *how to fight it*.

“These aren’t ghosts...” he muttered, turning to face his last standing ally. “They’re monsters!”

Alas, his ally was standing in form only, having long since expired. Half of his head had melted away as if by acid.

“Shit!” screamed Stark again. He turned and ran away as fast as he could. The only thing that chased him from behind was the death cries of his legless ally.

Chapter IV: The Fools Confess

Every person has their own past. For most people, all this means is that some amount of time has passed since they were born, and that some events have happened in this time that helped shape that person into who they are. But whatever meaning one's past has is irrelevant before the cold, hard fact that they have existed in the world for some amount of time.

And indeed, Orphen believed, just as people will forget parts of their past, they are equally as likely — and equally as fairly allowed — to *want* to forget parts of their past. The way that he did.

What brought Orphen's train of thought to this was a certain object standing tall in the middle of the mansion's front hall. Some small amount of light trickled into the building from between the boarded-up windows, showing that the dust was thick both in the air and on the ground — enough to show that besides Orphen's and Philietta's trails of footsteps, nobody had been inside this building in a very long time. The light was just enough to make out the details of the object — a huge statue of a woman, so tall that Orphen had to tilt his head back just to look up at its face.

It was a statue of one of The Weird Sisters, who were figures worshiped in various places by all sorts of people across the Continent. Orphen let out a small sigh as he recognized which of the figures this one was.

"The Goddess of the Present..." he muttered aloud.

He uncrossed his arms and started brushing away the dust that had begun to cling to his clothes when he suddenly noticed something odd about the statue.

"Hmm?"

"What is it?" asked Philietta.

"Oh, nothing really. I was just admiring the kind of person it takes to defile an object of religious worship like that," replied Orphen with a grin. Right in the middle of the statue's face, between the lady's two eyes, was a hole of such

shape and size that it resembled a third eye. It had clearly been done on purpose, giving off a rather unusual vibe of mysticism from what should have been a perfectly ordinary woman's face.

The rest of the entrance hall was about par for the course with these kinds of estates. Philietta closed the door behind them, basically plunging them both into utter darkness. A moment later, she pulled out a portable gas lantern and ignited the flame, lighting up their surroundings as well as the goddess statue once more.

Every person has their own past, Orphen repeated to himself, and that goes for Gods just as much as it does for humans. The eldest sister, the Goddess of the Past; the middle sister, the Goddess of the Present; and the youngest sister, the Goddess of the Future. Even they have their own pasts that made them into what they are.

And if their theme of Time was anything to go by, the three goddesses — the three Fates — had a future promised to them, as well. The same couldn't be said of humans, whose fates in life were much more uncertain. A person alive and well one moment could very easily die just a second later, after all.

Orphen laughed sarcastically when he realized he'd gotten slightly sentimental, turning to face Philietta in the dim light.

"...I must be going soft. I still can't believe I came all the way out to this dump without hearing a single proper explanation out of you."

"Oh? I thought we both agreed that you wouldn't be able to take me at my word without meeting my sponsor in person? That's precisely why I'm taking you to meet him right now."

"That's not what I meant," said Orphen, turning his gaze up towards the tall, dark ceiling. It was just regular darkness, and the light cast only regular shadows. There wasn't a trace of the strange *ghost*-like mist anywhere. "What I meant was, why me? Of all the Sorcerers on the Continent, you came to *me* specifically. Why? If all you needed was simply a strong enough Sorcerer, there should be at least a few to choose from."

"Like someone else from the Tower of Fangs... The infamous Krylancelo, perhaps?"

Orphen felt something stirring within him when that name escaped Philietta's lips. He met her gaze, and she met his in turn with her brilliant brown eyes practically ablaze.

"Please don't put me on the same level as a rat like Oswald. I went out looking for the man called Krylancelo. The one man who inherited all of the greatest combat and assassination arts from the most powerful Black Sorcerer on the Continent, Master Childman. His skills were so prodigious that by the tender age of fifteen, the boy himself was feared all across the Continent almost as much as his master—"

"Shut up," commanded Orphen in a stiff tone of voice.

Philietta did not obey. "But Krylancelo vanished from the Tower five years ago. There were many theories behind this disappearance, all sorts of wild speculation going around the underworld. Some speculated that he had a falling out with his Master, Childman; some thought that the Elders had deemed his power on par with Childman's to be too dangerous and had him wiped out; and yet others thought that he was sent to assassinate Pluto 'The Demon,' the one and only leader of the Thirteen Apostles and the only known Sorcerer on the Continent to rival Childman in power. But none of that matters to me," Philietta winked, "because I managed to track you down. Of the Sorcerers on the West coast of the Continent, you are undeniably the strongest of them all. Putting aside Childman, that is, who has himself been missing since departing on a top secret mission some weeks ago. The only other person who might have rivaled you was the woman known as 'The Chaos Witch,' but alas, she's been dead for five years now—"

"I told you to shut the fuck up!" yelled Orphen, losing his temper. He grabbed Philietta by the wrist and just barely managed to keep himself from lashing all manner of curses against her. He tried to force himself to calm down.

"I'm not Krylancelo. I'm Orphen. I've been Orphen ever since I left the Tower five years ago, and I had a very good reason for doing that. So don't ever call me by that name again," he said as threateningly as possible, but Philietta's smile didn't waver. He decided that threats weren't going to work on her, so he tried his best to explain himself instead. "I believe that a person's name holds a special kind of meaning. As long as I consider myself 'Orphen,' then the part of

me that was 'Krylancelo' is dead and gone. Nobody can bring Krylancelo back, for any reason. You can't raise the dead."

Orphen spat his old name with contempt and tried to release Philietta's hand, but before he could, she gently placed her free hand on top of his.

"A murderer who can't kill... A songbird that's forgotten how to sing. Is that how you've seen yourself this whole time?"

"Nothing as pretentious as that," groaned Orphen, slightly irritated by the comparison. "Besides, what does that make *you*? Philietta the Fools' Hound! Philietta, the woman who turns down no jobs. Philietta, the woman who finishes no jobs! And not for lack of skill or effort. Instead, you betray your employer. Nine times out of ten, you let your target go. The only ones you fight and kill seriously are Sorcerers. All looking for one in particular. Then when you find him, you don't even try to kill him — You lead him all the way to a different town for a totally different job, and then even start guarding him. But then you vanish from his side and let him get attacked by assassins anyway! The *only* thing you can do right is kill Sorcerers. No more, and no less."

"...You're right," said Philietta, dropping her hands from his. "We can talk while I guide you... to the mansion's basement."

"A fool... An outsider."

"What?"

"I'm talking about myself," said Philietta with a shy smile. The two were relying only on the light from the gas lantern to lead them through the dusty abandoned mansion.

According to stories, the mansion had been abandoned for ten years. Back when the master was still alive, the servants supposedly kept the place spotless. He was a solitary man with no family, simply a few hired servants and a live-in assistant.

That was a long time ago, though. The mansion as it stood now had not a trace of the dignity it might once have. Now the mansion was inhabited by mice which scurried around crying, having been disturbed by Orphen and Philietta,

and was home to more spiders than probably anywhere else in the village, judging by the sheer number of cobwebs. Orphen waded through the dust and cobwebs, following after Philietta while she continued talking about her past.

“There’s a tiny little village to the west of here, one that’s not listed on any maps. The locals took to calling it Raindust. They named it that because of how the village had come about. In a small-scale conflict that came and went like a storm some dozens of years ago, many people were driven from their home villages. These people gathered together, and before they knew it, the area had become a small village. Settled like the dust after a rain storm. That’s my hometown.”

Upon hearing this, Orphen suddenly muttered “...I’m pretty sure my parents’ home is supposed to be around there.”

“You have parents? And you call yourself an orphan?” asked Philietta, surprised.

“We’re talking about your life story right now, not mine.”

“Oh, I see. You’re the type who likes to make other people talk about their past, never talking about your own,” Philietta shrugged before continuing her own story. “I left my hometown when I was fifteen. I’d gotten sick and tired of that little dump in the middle of nowhere, so I ran away from home. I didn’t take much luggage with me, and this was the first village that I just barely managed to stumble across.”

“Fifteen years old, huh...” said Orphen, summing Philietta up from head to toe to try and guess her current age. “I take it that was ten years ago, then?”

“Not quite. Nine years ago, actually.”

“So I was off by a year, so what?”

Philietta giggled slightly. “A lot can happen in a year,” she said, before her expression suddenly turned darker. Orphen scratched his head, trying to knock off an insect that had fallen on him.

“For example, if I had left that village just a year later... then I’d never have met him.”

“Him?” asked Orphen, still battling with the spider that had gotten tangled up in his hair.

Philietta started speaking in more pained tones. “The one who found me collapsed by the side of the road and took me under his care.... Sammy.”

She spoke the name as though that were all there was to say about him. She didn’t say anything more after this, so Orphen didn’t press any further. He simply made a mental note of the name. Sammy.

While he was committing the name to memory, he managed to pull the spider free of his hair and toss it away behind him. As soon as it hit the ground, several mice pounced on it, squabbling over the spoils.

After that, Orphen and Philietta continued silently through the mansion’s halls for a while. They passed through what looked like an old kitchen, into a corridor leading to a staircase taking them down to an underground wine cellar. With the way down right in front of them, Orphen decided to speak up once more.

“Why wouldn’t you have met that Sammy guy if you’d arrived just a year later?”

Philietta’s reply was short and to-the-point. “Because he died a year after I met him.”

...Oh, so she’s the type to try and brush over the parts of her past that she doesn’t wanna talk about.

Philietta took off down the stairs without warning, and Orphen simply followed after her.

Maybe it was because the rainy season had only just passed, but the stone staircase was oddly damp. Not only that, but it was humid. Orphen brushed his hand up against the wall and realized that the walls were thick with moisture too. He dried his hand off against his leather pants. After that, he noticed that every step they took down the stairs took them deeper into a strangely moist underground space.

Orphen could feel himself running out of patience. “So, who was Sammy, anyway?”

“He was the live-in assistant who worked in this mansion. The one who worked for Phonoghoulous, the Black Sorcerer who was exiled from the Tower of Fangs,” answered Philietta without turning around. Orphen couldn’t even guess what kind of face she might be making as she said that.

The staircase ended just as Philietta’s explanation did.

They had arrived at a landing with a single iron door shut tight before them. It wasn’t steel plated or fancy in any way. Just a totally ordinary door. Philietta stood in front of it and extinguished the gas lantern’s flame.

“...Why’d you do that?” asked Orphen, more curious than bothered by the action. Orphen could tell even in the pitch darkness that Philietta had shrugged in response.

She walked up to the door in the darkness and forced it open. It made a loud creaking noise as it swung open, and the thick atmosphere of the room beyond slapped Orphen in the face like a wave.

He could smell water. Stagnant, moldy water.

The smell of mold and water wasn’t the only thing that came out from beyond the doorway. A pale light also flooded out, illuminating the corridor. Peeking inside, Orphen saw a sphere of light hovering in midair like a giant firefly.

To his right, he saw a bunch of large wooden boxes sitting neatly in a pile. Each box was a perfect cube of one meter on each side, all sturdy-looking things. Every last box was sealed tightly shut, with an annoying number of warnings plastered all over them saying not to open any of them. They also had...

“A manufacture date? Imperial Redlight year thirty eight... Almost ten years ago...?”

Orphen read the date aloud, but Philietta didn’t respond. Instead, she stiffened up when she heard the year. She twisted her red lips into a forced smile.

Orphen found something odd about that, but he went back to examining the room instead of pressing her about it. The room might once have been quite

spacious, but so many boxes were piled up that it instead felt rather cramped. Right at the far end of the room was one wooden box far larger than the others...

Or so Orphen had thought at a glance. When he took a closer look, he noticed that it wasn't a box at all, but instead a large glass tank full of water.

It was a two meter tall water tank pressed right up against the back wall. Every side was so thickly coated with moss that Orphen had mistaken it for another box at first. It was easily big enough to fit a shark inside. He could see places on the tank's surface where the moss had been wiped away a few times.

"This is..."

Philietta walked in and began to put on a small performance. She put one hand above the ball of light and said: "This is where Phonoghoulous rests."

"Where he... rests?"

"Indeed," said an unfamiliar voice... from inside of the water tank. "I've been waiting for you. I'm glad you could make it. My name... is Ramone Phonoghoulous. My father was Kief Phonoghoulous, the Black Sorcerer exiled from the Tower of Fangs. As you can see, I've... *inherited* his research."



— *Volkan's Theater's First Official Rally! Let's Make It Rich Selling Scrap Metal!* —

This was a flag that Volkan had crafted out of a wooden pole, some white bedsheets, and blue paint that he'd 'happened' to come across. Volkan lead the charge with this flag high in the air, the five children from his rally eagerly tagging along, straining their eyes at the ground along the sides of the road. Dortin was trailing along far at the rear far less enthusiastically.

The plan that Volkan had come up with for this afternoon was so stupid that it didn't even need explaining. Dortin saw absolutely no point in tagging along, but his brother wasn't about to let him go anytime soon. So, he was forced to tag along with this band of children searching for scrap metal to sell to peddlers in town.

At least this is a better idea than 'The Terrifying Snake-Man!' I guess, sighed Dortin internally in an attempt to console himself.

Dortin took a look at their little troupe. Volkan led the charge, driving them on like a commanding officer while waving his big, silly flag. Two children followed directly behind him, carrying the large wooden crate that they had used for their 'Terrifying Snake-Man' performance the other day. The job of the remaining three children — plus Dortin — was to pick up any bits of wire fence, bent nails, or whatever other little bits of scrap metal they could come across, and toss it into the box.

Dortin knew exactly how meager the price tag on this kind of junk was, which was why he was participating as little as he possibly could without risking having his brother snapping at him. He considered many times just turning around and going back to the inn, but when he considered the torture that Volkan would undoubtedly come up with for him if he ever dared try that, he realized that just going along with the silly little scheme was the much safer option.

So that's exactly what he did. Trailing along behind everyone else, exerting himself as little as possible, Dortin was currently safer than he had been in a long time. If Volkan noticed that he was slacking off, he would be beaten senseless, but the back of the line was in Volkan's blind spot, so he didn't even have that to worry about.

While plodding along down the road just minding his own business, Dortin noticed a pair of familiar faces approaching from the other direction. One of them was Claiomh, wearing her usual jeans and T-shirt with a blue men's shirt over the top. The other one was a boy that Dortin had only seen once or twice, all dressed in black just like the wicked moneylending Sorcerer. Dortin searched through his memories, trying to remember the boy's name. He had heard the moneylender talking to him before... Majic, if he remembered right.

The two of them noticed Volkan's group, too, and came rushing over. Claiomh seemed to be sulking about something, but she greeted them anyway.

"Hiya," she said, waving her hand.

"...Good afternoon," said Dortin, coming to a halt. Volkan and his troupe

didn't bother to stop, instead marching on while leaving Dortin behind.

Dortin watched the boys march away out of the corner of his eyes, fixed his glasses, and turned his attention to Claiomh and Majic.

"Are you out on a walk?"

"Nope. We're looking for Orphen. Have you seen him?" asked Claiomh, sighing. Behind her, Majic stood there looking very clearly uncomfortable. Dortin didn't know what was going on, but he figured the boy must have his reasons.

"I haven't seen him today, I'm afraid. Was he not supposed to go to the guard's office this morning?"

"He went there this morning, then came back to the inn. Then he left again. Along with that assassin."

Dortin could tell from the way Claiomh had phrased that last part that this was one thing he should not probe into too deeply, but he also knew better than to let it slide, because it could just as easily come back to bite him later.

"He left with an assassin?"

Majic was quicker to respond this time. "Oh, umm, well, yes, but not quite. He was with a tall lady. You know, the other person who was staying at the inn last night?"

"I remember seeing her last night..." said Dortin. More accurately, there was no way he could forget. Someone in a full leather bodysuit was hard to miss.

Claiomh turned around to glare daggers at Majic. "If we don't find him soon, that lady's gonna kill him! She was an assassin hired to come after him, remember?"

I'd be more worried for the assassin than that crazy Sorcerer, Dortin thought to himself. He didn't say this aloud, though. This human girl was third on the list of people he didn't want to annoy, right after Volkan and Orphen.

"I'll keep an eye out for him, then, so—" was all he got to say before a deep, loud scream cut him off.

He turned around to see his brother being sent flying, and the children

scattering in all directions. The cause of all this was a sword-bearing man who looked anywhere between thirty and forty. His face was twisted in fear, and it was apparent that he was the one who had been screaming, not Volkan.

“Outta the way!” the man yelled as he charged down the road towards them. Dortin moved out of the way, remaining perfectly calm as he took in the man’s appearance.

It was hard to tell his exact age because of his stubble, which made him look almost middle-aged in the daylight, but probably wouldn’t look so out of place if he were sitting at the back of a dimly lit tavern. His sharp gaze reminded Dortin of the moneylending Sorcerer, for some reason. He had a pointed nose and a shoe in the middle of his face...

...A shoe?

Dortin doubted what he was seeing, but then it all began to make sense. The shoe collided with the man’s face with a loud *whack*, knocking him off his feet. Claiomh had hit him in the face with a perfectly executed roundhouse kick. She lowered her foot back to the ground with a little “Hmph.”

By her side, Majic held one palm to his head, having seen this coming from a mile away.

“I-I’m bleeding?!” yelled the man, holding his nose to try and stop the nosebleed. “What the hell was that for?!”

“That’s my line!” yelled Claiomh in turn. She pointed at the man and said: “What are you thinking, knocking helpless children off the road like that?!”

“Now you’re just taking out your frustration on random passers-by. This has nothing to do with the kids...” mumbled Majic, but he immediately shut up when Claiomh glared back at him menacingly again.

Dortin didn’t join the conversation, but he did silently agree with Majic’s assessment.

“Listen, girlie, now is *really* not the time for that!” the man yelled as he leaped back to his feet, swinging his arm outwards. He seemed to be pointing down the road he had just come sprinting down.

Everyone present turned to look, but all they saw was Volkan egging on the children to get as much of the scrap metal as possible back into the upturned box.

Whatever the case, at least nobody seemed to be injured.

Then Claiomh started yelling again. “We’re the ones who don’t have time for *you*! We need to hurry up and find Orphen so we can protect him from that seductress assassin!”

“Seductress...?” said Majic with exactly the sort of look that Orphen might have shot Claiomh if he’d overheard her.

But nobody was listening to Majic. The situation had taken a turn for the worse in an instant. The man had grabbed Claiomh by the wrist and held her up by the arm.

“Don’t give *me* this bullshit about assassins! If you’re playing some dumb game, go do it somewhere—”

He paused and went over Claiomh’s words again in his head.

“Did you just say Orphen?”

That pause was enough for Claiomh to struggle free.

“Let go of me, pervert!”

She pulled herself as close to the man as possible and head-butted him right in the face, knocking him back to the ground with a pained scream.

“Eww, gross. I didn’t get any of his nose blood in my hair, did I?” Claiomh asked Majic, showing him the top of her head.

“Umm... Are you alright?” Dortin asked the man, interpreting him to be the victim in this case.

The man pressed on his nose, trying to stop the blood again. “Crazy bitch! I can’t believe you’d attack me, Stark the Prowler, not once, but twice!” he groaned. Apparently, his name was Stark.

Dortin wobbled up a bit closer and asked again, “Mister, are you alright?”

“Y-Yeah, I’m fine. You wouldn’t happen to have any tissue paper on hand,

would you?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t.”

“Hrmmm. Oh well,” the man groaned, rising to his feet and drawing his sword. This was enough to make even Claiomh back away slightly.

“Wh-What are you thinking, drawing that thing in the middle of the road?” she asked.

“I’m not too thrilled about attacking women or children, but I can’t let you go after what you said just now,” said Stark, confirming that nothing was chasing him down the road he had come from. “Looks like they’re not following me. Good. I can focus on you lot, then.”

“What, are you mad I called you a pervert? I didn’t mean it seriously!”

“Who the hell would draw their sword over something as stupid as that?!” yelled Stark, waving his saber in front of him. “That name you said just now. Orphen! You’re his companions, and I’m afraid I’m gonna have to take you hostage now that I know that.”

“Wait,” said Dortin, looking up at Stark, “are you sure you should be yelling that in broad daylight? And in the middle of the road, no less?”

“Urk...” gulped Stark, with an awkward expression. He had no response to that. The dwarf made a very good point.

When Stark stopped to take a look around, he noticed that a sizable crowd had begun to gather around. Some of them appeared to be the parents of the children that he had knocked off of the road, yelling out of fear for their children’s safety. Volkan had scampered off into the safety of the crowd himself, yelling things like “It’s fine! That there bespectacled boy is a member of my Volkan’s Theater! He’ll protect the children!”

Thanks a lot, Bro... grumbled Dortin.

The children had gathered up some distance away by the large wooden crate, so as long as this Stark fellow didn’t go off on another crazy rampage, Dortin figured the children should probably be fine either way.

Claiomh yelled out from behind Majic, “You’re one of those random worthless

assassins that Orphen was talking about!”

“Master only said he was being targeted by a lot of assassins; he didn’t call them random or worthless...” said Majic worriedly to Claiomh, wishing that she wouldn’t wind the man up any further.

Stark lost his temper completely.

“Don’t just brush me off as a side-character! I happen to be slightly well-known in my line of work—”

“Not ‘famous’ ? Only ‘slightly’ well-known?”

“Shut up! I’m ‘the Gray Silhouette,’ ‘the Shadowy Figure of the Coastline!’ I’m Stark Neykid!!”

“Umm... That’s not the kind of name you should yell in public, especially when you’re about to try and kidnap somebody...” said Dortin, tugging on Stark Neykid’s sleeve.

“Oh, shut up! They’ve already seen my face, so there’s no use trying to hide now anyway!”

“Umm... Oh, whatever,” said Majic, “I’ll just try to hold back enough that it doesn’t kill him. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six...”

“Huh?”

Stark Neykid looked over at Majic and noticed the boy counting down to something.

“Five, four, three, two, one...”

Around the time he reached ‘three,’ the wind around Majic had picked up, lifting his hair like the gravity around him had just lessened. Stark Neykid recognized this sensation.

“Another Sorcerer?! This wasn’t in the job description—!”

“I release thee, Sword of Light!!”

-Crack!-

A beam of light shot out of Majic’s outstretched hand and rushed straight over to Stark. And just like that... it passed straight through him. Without so

much as a gust of wind.

“...Huh?”

Stark had put up his guard, but it seemed that he hadn't needed to. That attack hadn't injured him at all. It had just been a bright flash of light.

“Eeehh?” moaned Majic, looking at his hand like it was some kind of defective product. “That could've gone better... I figured it'd work so long as I focused and put time into charging it up...”

“You're completely useless!” yelled Claiomh, gripping his shoulder from behind.

Majic disagreed. “I'm not *completely* useless. The light part came out, at least! I'm already making progress!”

“Don't fuck with me, you brats!!”

Uh-oh! yelped Dortin internally. He could tell that the assassin had snapped completely this time, so he ducked out of the way as quickly as he could. Stark raised his sword and charged straight for Majic and Claiomh.

Dortin watched the man's back rushing away from him, wondering all the while what he could do to help the two who were about to be attacked. He didn't have much time. The assassin would reach them before he could and attack them with his sword. But since he had lost his sense of reason, that attack might not be as deadly as it looked. Dortin had once read in a book that slashing attacks from a sword were less likely to kill someone in one hit than stabbing them was. What a dangerous book that was. The person who wrote it must have been — No, this was no time to be getting lost in his hobby.

He recalled seeing Claiomh's swordplay in the past. She had been fairly skilled at it. But right now, she was unarmed, so that wasn't going to do her much good. Even if she'd had a sword, it was unlikely she'd be able to fend off a proper trained assassin, anyway. Which meant that there was very little she could do to protect herself right now. But to be honest, Dortin was even more worried for the boy called Majic. He didn't even look deft enough to *dodge* a sword, never mind swing one. The situation looked utterly hopeless for them.

Dortin briefly considered running to their aid, but there was no way he could

catch up with the man now. Next, he considered throwing a rock at the man to try and distract him, if even a little. That would probably be enough to convince the onlookers that he had at least *tried* to protect them, if nothing else.

...*That's weird*, Dörtin realized as he bent down to pick up a stone that plenty of time had passed already. He should have heard Majic or Claiomh yelling out in pain by now, but he didn't hear anything of the sort.

He turned around to see what the assassin had done, only to find that he had been knocked out of the way by some large, dark figure. Stark Neykid had been knocked to the ground by a dark *something*.

"Dammit!" the assassin yelled, "I knew it'd come after me!"

"...Huh?"

Dörtin turned to look where Stark had shifted his gaze to — the path that he'd originally come running down, terrified. The children had long since run away, leaving the wooden crate on its side with the scrap metal all over the road. And right by the roadside... stood a strange, dark *figure*.

"What *is* that thing?" asked Claiomh. Nobody answered. Nobody knew *how* to answer.

It looked like a suit of old-fashioned armor, the kind that nobles might often have decorating their parlor rooms. But the armor that stood by the roadside was a matte black color instead of silver, and it held no weapons to speak of. It simply stood there, unarmed, gazing in their direction with an eyeless face.

The armor made a *clink* noise as it raised its right arm, and from the gap between the fingers on the gauntlet shot forth a long, thin, whip-like thing.

The whip tore into the ground where Stark had been a moment earlier. It was as thin as a string, but it managed to gouge a huge several-dozen-centimeter chunk out of the ground, kicking up a cloud of dust and dirt.

"Eat this!" yelled Stark, firing a bolt of lightning out of his right hand after dodging the armor's attack. The lightning crashed into the thing and sent it collapsing to the ground with a loud crash. But that wasn't enough to keep it down. The thing soon stood back up like it had taken no damage at all.

This time, it didn't even raise its arm. The whole suit of armor rattled for a brief moment, which was followed by a shrill whistling noise.

Stark couldn't react fast enough to dodge this attack. Something struck him in the shoulder with enough force to knock him off-balance, sending blood spurting from the wound all over the ground. It didn't look life-threatening, but the bigger problem was that the attack had been *too fast to see with the naked eye*.

Some of the onlookers began screaming at the horrific sight.

And, as if taking this as its cue...

...*It* materialized right in front of Majic and Claiomh. It was the ghost from the previous night. The black mist gathered around... and took on human shape.

"It's the ghost! It's the curse of Phonoghoulous!" yelled one of the onlookers.

The moment the villagers heard that, they all fled the scene in a panic. Even amidst all of the commotion, Dortin could hear the ghost's words clearly.

"YOu... I sAw yOU... yESTerDaY! yOU're... A SORcEReR!"

The ghost took the form of a nervous, high-strung looking young man.

"whEN wiLL YoU... StoP rUnnING... PHONOGHOULOUS?!"

"I-I'm not Phonoghoulous, I'm—"

Majic tried to protest, but the ghost didn't seem to be listening. It spread its arms out wide and yelled even louder. "BeAR tHE WeIGHT Of yoUR SiNS... PHONOGHOULOUS!!"

The wind suddenly picked up and formed a small tornado, kicking up a thick cloud of dirt from the surface of the road. Dortin covered his face with both arms. He could hear screams of panic and terror, but he couldn't tell if they were from Majic and Claiomh, or the villagers.

When the wind died down, Dortin was the only one left. Everyone else had vanished.

He scanned the abandoned area blankly. There were a couple of villagers who hadn't managed to run away in time collapsed on the ground, and Volkan lay

there covered in the dirty footsteps of those who had tried to kick him out of the way in the middle of all the confusion. But the assassin Stark Neykid, as well as Majic and Claiomh, were all gone. So were the suit of armor and the ghost.

“Wha... What’s going on?”

He fell to the ground, all the strength drained from his legs. He corrected his glasses, which were about to fall off his face.

“Assassins showing up in the middle of the day, ghosts running around in broad daylight... This village is *weird*,” he concluded. He knew full well that was *not* the problem here, but it was about all his brain could really process at the moment.

He walked vacantly over to Volkan’s side to see if his brother was still alive. He had been thoroughly trounced and trampled, but he was still alive enough to curse everyone under the sun for it.

“Damn it... Those blasted lunatics, trampling all over people like that... I oughta cry them to death in the middle of night like a baby...”

“Bro, hey Bro,” Dortin called out, trying to bring Volkan back to his senses. “What are we gonna do? Claiomh, and that boy Majic, they’re both gone!”

Volkan sat upright and groaned loudly. “Hrmm... They must’ve been kidnapped by the ghost.”

“Yeah, probably...” agreed Dortin, scanning the vacant area once more. He stopped looking around when he realized the only thing they could do next. “...We’re gonna have to let that Sorcerer know about this. But when he hears about what happened...”

Dortin bit his tongue. Volkan understood completely. “That dastardly Sorcerer will *definitely* blame us for this, even though it wasn’t our fault at all. Just like all those other times.”

“No, up until now it always *has* been our fault...”

Volkan ignored his brother and tried to come up with a plan. “What if we shaved our heads and wrote ‘SORRY’ on top in black ink, then licked his shoes in a show of apology?”

“He’d feed us to the Snake-Man...”

“It wasn’t even my fault.”

“It wasn’t my fault, either.”

“We shouldn’t have to put up with that!”

“I agree...”

And so the two boys sat there in a daze, gazing up blankly at the sky.



“Phonoghoulous... *Ramone* Phonoghoulous?” Orphen repeated doubtfully, putting his hand to his chin.

“You *have* heard of Kief Phonoghoulous... my father, have you not?”

Orphen realized that the voice wasn’t actually coming from behind the glass, but that there was something like a speaking tube sticking out of the top of the water tank.

He turned around to Philietta and said: “You mind leaving us alone for a bit?”

“What for?” she returned playfully with a little wink; clearly, she already knew and was just teasing him.

Orphen sighed and played along. “Because a pair of Tower Sorcerers have a bit of catching up to do.”

“Okay.”

Philietta decided to reward Orphen’s honesty by going along with his request. The iron door creaked shut with a heavy noise behind her.

“I’ve only ever heard the name; I’ve never actually met the guy,” said Orphen as he turned to face the water tank once more. “The Tower’s Elders forbid anyone from talking about him or his research. That said...” He pointed at the pendant hanging around his neck — a one-legged dragon wrapped around a sword, the proof that one was an established Sorcerer of the Tower of Fangs — before continuing. “My teacher took a brief interest in his work, so I’ve seen some of the papers he’s published.”

“Only a brief interest, you say?”

Ramone seemed surprised to hear this.

“Yeah. He lost interest pretty quickly. Not only was it an incomplete thesis, but it was one that my teacher had absolutely no use of.”

“What do you mean, he had no use of it?”

“From what I remember, the core of Phonoghoulous’ research was taking humans and making them into stronger creatures. Master Childman, though...” Orphen paused for a moment and tried to find the right words. “Well, he was *already* head and shoulders above any human being, Sorcerer or not. A genius of his caliber only comes around once every few centuries.”

“I see...” Ramone — or so he called himself — chuckled to himself inside the tank. “If that’s what he thought my father’s research was, then I can see why he’d have found no use of it. But I don’t believe that’s why he cast it aside. I think you are misunderstanding something that your Master did not. You see, the goal of my father’s research was not simply to create beings superior to humans.”

“Then what was it?”

“If that were all it was, the Tower may have called Kief Phonoghoulous a foolish man, but they would never have exiled him. My father was always complaining that they could not see the importance of what he was *truly* trying to do for them.” Ramone revealed the truth in as seemingly disinterested a tone as possible. “He was trying to create beings that could rival even the strongest of the Dragons in sheer combat prowess.”

“Artificial beings that could rival the *Dragons*?” Orphen repeated incredulously.

“Dragons,” Ramone began, like he was reciting the pages of a history book, “the six species that stole the secrets of Magic from the Gods and created their own Sorcery. Beings that came to this Continent from the Land of Giants, Jotunheim, as they made an attempt to escape the Gods’ wrath. Eventually, one of the Dragon races — the Celestials — passed sorcery down to the human race, although inadvertently. This gave rise to human Sorcerers, such as you... and my father.”

“Just your *father*?” Orphen inquired doubtfully.

“Indeed,” Ramone answered as though he were having fun. “I am no Sorcerer. I may have inherited the qualities from my father, but he never once trained me in the arts. He was forever obsessed with trying to complete his life’s work.”

Apparently having reached the heart of the matter, Ramone’s voice grew dead serious once more. “That... is exactly why we were unable to take care of the Creatures that he left behind in the world.”

Creatures... Orphen repeated the word to himself, upon which he recalled the high-strung *Ghost*, the strange silhouette of the giant *Snake-Man*, and *The Hand* that was so easily able to crush a man’s skull in its grip.

But if those *Creatures* were the result of Phonoghoulous’ research...

“Hah!” Orphen laughed through his nose. “*Those* things were the best he could do? Sure, they *look* intimidating enough, but you can’t seriously believe that they’d stand half a chance in a fight against a Dragon, do you? Dragon Sorcery is a topic we don’t even fully *understand*. They’re just that powerful. I’ve experienced a mere fraction of what they’re capable of firsthand, and I can say with complete confidence that those *things* wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

“But *you* made it out alive, did you not?”

Orphen froze at Phonoghoulous words, the man in the tank not even seeming surprised to hear that Orphen had gone up against Dragon Sorcery and survived. The room grew eerily silent for a few moments, lit only faintly by the floating light.

“The Creatures you have seen were all failures,” Ramone continued calmly. “My father deliberately made weaker ones and gradually built them up in strength. Artificial evolution, I believe he called it. Have you ever heard this theory before? Stories have it that when humans first inherited sorcery from the Dragons, their power was laughably inconsequential. But as the years went on and the Celestials’ blood was passed down from one generation of Sorcerers to another, their limits began to expand exponentially... All the way up to this very day, where human Sorcerers now outclass a number of Dragons in terms of inherent ability.”

“Even if that’s true, all human Sorcerers have their limits. Hell, talented Sorcerers these days are actually on the decline, from what I’ve heard.”

“What if they are intentionally being culled?”

Ramone spoke as though he were having fun debating this with Orphen. Orphen found himself merely annoyed and tried to divert his attention elsewhere, turning to look up at the speaking tube once more. That was when he noticed something else directly above the tank — something that resembled a garbage disposal chute. For some reason, it led directly into the water tank.

Before Orphen could wonder what the chute was there for, however, Ramone picked up where he had left off.

“Humans don’t evolve by preserving their past. They evolve by *disposing* of it. As soon as we come up with a more efficient way to do something, we immediately discard whatever method we had used up until that point. This is how human civilization has evolved over the centuries. If we assume that sorcery follows the same trends, then the new generation of Sorcerers would immediately make the previous generation obsolete. The elders would fear that, and almost certainly never just sit there and allow themselves to become *obsolete*. If the newer generation realized the extent of their powers, it could lead to another great tragedy such as with the Celestials.”

“Did *your father* believe that, too?” asked Orphen, crossing his arms.

“Indeed, he did. In fact, he deliberately tried to bring about just such a tragedy artificially in his own Creatures.”

“Just so you know, I didn’t come here to debate our life philosophies. If *that’s* why the statue of the Goddess of the Present in the main hall had a third eye carved into it, then it’s a crying shame. That thing’s a pretty valuable antique, you know?”

“...There’s a different meaning behind that.”

“...What?”

Orphen had meant his statement to be pure sarcasm, so he was genuinely surprised when Ramone gave him a serious response. Ramone didn’t seem to want to explain any further, though, instead going straight back to the previous

topic.

“In the end, my father’s research was a resounding failure. When you think about it, there’s no way a human could create something far surpassing their own limits when the methods of creating such a being are inherently *rooted* in the limited capabilities of what humans can do. Even the very pinnacle of his research was merely a handful of berserk monsters that he called ‘Creatures.’ I’ve taken to calling them ‘The Fools,’ personally. At any rate, all my father managed to prove was that his research was misguided at best.”

“And at worst?”

“Utterly foolish,” Ramone answered without missing a beat. “Criminal, even. So many were sacrificed in the name of his research, and then the one responsible ended his own life. Such a foolish outcome.”

Hearing this, Orphen recalled the story of the celebrity who was killed by Phonoghoulous, leaving behind his mansion as the village’s only inn. He knew it was pointless to ask, but he felt curious to know nonetheless: “How many sacrifices were there, exactly?”

“As many as there are wooden crates to seal them in.”

Orphen recalled the pile of crates and turned around to count them up. There were between ten and twenty of them.

“Each crate contained one animal — such as a snake or a rabbit — with two or three ‘Factors’ implanted in its corpse. I don’t know how the ‘Factors’ were created, I only know that they were basically what would give the Creatures their abilities, whereas the type of corpse used was what decided their outward appearance or ‘Vessel.’ Animals were one thing, but my father eventually sank to human experimentation as a direct result of wanting to know how far his research could go. Apparently, the ‘Factors’ would grow at an uncontrollable pace only once the box was reopened from the outside following a period of incubation, meaning the only way to prevent them from losing control was to keep them sealed away.”

“W-Wait a second, you said they’d grow uncontrollably? Does that mean that some of them would become much larger than when they’d been put inside the box?”

“A handful of them did, yes. Why do you ask?”

“Ah, shit!” screamed Orphen, suddenly recalling the strange sight he’d seen upon first arriving in the village. Dortin had been dragging a large crate identical to the ones in this room, along with the shed skin of a ridiculously huge snake. When he told Ramone about this, the man didn’t seem too surprised.

“I see... Then it is as Philietta told me. The Creatures on the outside truly have increased in number.”

“So, hang on...”

“The crates — my father called them the Creatures’ Pandoras — number more than just the ones left in this room. Some vanished shortly after his death, whereas others were stolen by thieves and bandits later on who thought they might contain valuables. I could do nothing but sit and watch them being carried out from within this glass prison of mine. No doubt your friends found one of the stolen boxes in the forest, but whether they opened Pandora’s Box themselves or found it after the fact, I cannot say.”

“Fucking hell, guys!!” Orphen screamed at the top of his voice.

He was on the verge of tears by this point, cradling his head. “Shit. Fucking bullshit... I was gonna turn you down after hearing what caused this mess, but not now that I know those *dumbasses* might’ve had a hand in it!”

Volkan, you weaselly little ass... I’ll rip your throat out with my bare hands the second I’ve wrung every last penny out of you! Orphen swore to rain fiery judgment down upon the delusional dwarf.

“...So far, I’ve seen three Creatures. A *Ghost*, a *Snake-Man*, and a *Hand*.”

“The first must be Sammy.”

“Wait, what—?”

“The Snake-Man sounds like Kiquime. The hand... probably Kenkrim. Although Accel should have been in the same Pandora as him...”

“I don’t give a fuck what their names—” Orphen began, but he stopped himself short. His head was racing with familiar words and names.

Sammy. He looked after her. She called herself a ‘Fool.’

He was Phonoghoulous' assistant.

Phonoghoulous tried to create beings superior to humans... and failed. That misguided research brought a number of sacrifices. Sacrifices. Unknown to the world. Human experimentation. Sacrifices!

Orphen's mind went back to the timid, highly-strung appearance of the ghost wearing a white coat. He remembered how it had been yelling about trying to get revenge on Phonoghoulous.

"Phonoghoulous, you bastard...! You turned your own assistant into a *Creature?!'*" Orphen screamed, blinded with rage.

Ramone didn't respond. Orphen ran up to the mossy water tank and began bashing on it with his fist.

"Answer me, you son of a bitch! Did you turn your own assistant into one of those monsters?!"

"My father—"

"Cut the bullshit already, *Phonoghoulous!*" he yelled once more, punching the water tank so hard that it wouldn't be surprising if it shattered. He broke the skin on his knuckles and smeared blood on the outside of the tank. "*Ramone? Phonoghoulous' son?* As if you could ever have a family, you insane bastard!"

Orphen had no way of knowing for sure, but his instincts told him that he'd hit the nail on the head. As if to confirm his suspicions, the Phonoghoulous inside the tank didn't even try to correct him.

"You're Phonoghoulous, the one and only! The only reason you made those *Creatures* is because you hated weak little humans, plain and simple! And you turned your own fucking assistant into a monster! He had to suffer just because *you* were a delusional lunatic!"

"...What does that make you then, Krylancelo? All of your sorcery, all of your skills... honed purely for the sake of murdering other humans."

Phonoghoulous spoke so calmly that Orphen inadvertently took a step backwards. But the madman continued, as if trying to provoke Orphen even further.

“I had Philietta report to me on everything she learned about you. I had to make sure you were up to the task of disposing of my berserk Creatures, you see. You were raised at the Tower of Fangs, and your training consisted primarily of combat and assassination arts. You are an expert of any and all forms of weaponry, including all known — and some *unknown* — martial arts. All so that you could *kill* more efficiently. You may pretend to have forgotten your training, but your body remembers everything that was ever drilled into you. Your talents are very similar to the ‘Factors’ of my Creatures in that regard, wouldn’t you say?”

“I was taught...” Orphen faltered slightly, gripping the pendant around his neck to convince himself that he was different. “*We* were taught by a genius. Master Childman was so amazing that I thought he was a monster in human skin. Even if you took all of his students together and pitted them against him, he would easily come out on top. It was impossible for any one of us to learn *everything* he had to teach...”

Orphen gulped down saliva to wet his dry throat before continuing.

“That’s why he taught each of us something different. I just happened to be the one who received combat training from him. Even so, he didn’t *create* me. He *taught* me, and I *learned* from him. Besides...”

Orphen had only one last thing to say.

“My name isn’t Krylancelo. I’m Orphen!”

As Orphen spoke, he could hear a loud noise gradually drawing closer.

Someone was screaming, and they were getting closer. The screaming was coming from *inside the ceiling*.

The scream reached their location, along with the one it belonged to, and both came flying out of the garbage disposal chute into the water tank. The mossy water splashed up out of the tank and licked the ceiling.



When Orphen saw the person struggling to breathe inside the filthy tank, he took immediate action.

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

The energy beam tore the glass tank into pieces, flooding the room with mossy water. From out of the tank came one familiar human figure, and one unfamiliar, much more streamlined figure.

He ran over to the one he recognized first.

“Majic!” he yelled, pulling the blond boy to his feet.

Majic stood there coughing for a while, trying to catch his breath. When he could speak again, he turned to Orphen with tears in his eyes.

“Master! Where have you been?!” the boy yelled.

Orphen had no idea what had happened while he was gone, but he figured that he should probably apologize before anything else. “Sorry,” he said, lowering his head.

“*Sorry?* That’s all you can say?! *Claiomh is dead!* They killed her!”

“...They *what?*”

Orphen was too startled by the sudden news to process his thoughts properly. While trying to figure out what was going on, his gaze sank to the other figure at his feet.

Majic, too, turned to see what his master was looking at... and the sight left him utterly speechless.

Before them in the middle of the floor lay a two-meter-long giant fish. It might have been a tuna, but Orphen wasn’t sure, having never actually seen a live one before, only the pictures on the side of canned tuna.

The fish lay there with its bright red gills exposed. It seemed to be suffocating, flinching a few times before gradually growing utterly still. But that wasn’t why Orphen was staring at the creature.

Right around the tuna’s stomach, behind silvery-white scales, was the outline of a human being. It seemed to be *inside* of the fish rather than simply *attached*

to it, sticking out like a snake had swallowed some over-sized prey. The facial features were difficult to make out from through the creature's scaly skin, giving no indication as to what the man might once have looked like. The only thing that was clear was that the man's mouth was open and that a tube was coming out of it. Orphen traced the length of the tube and, just as he'd thought, it was connected to the other end of the speaking tube that the earlier voice had been coming from.

By the time Orphen had figured all of this out, the fish had stopped moving entirely.

"Wh-What *is* that thing?" Majic asked while wiping the moss off his face.

Orphen felt like he was being interrogated, hesitant to answer. He tried to go through the facts in his head.

"I don't believe it... What could possibly drive you to turn *yourself* into a Creature?"

"...What's going on?"

"I dunno. All I can say is that whether this is Ramone or Kief, it's the end result of Phonoghoulous the Black Sorcerer and his twisted research."

Following that, Orphen felt *something else* growing closer as well. When he spun back around, he saw a thick, dark mist pouring into the room from the garbage chute.

The mist began to take human form. It stood there before them, shaking with rage.

"dON't THInK yOu CAN eSCAPE... PHONOGHOULOUS!" it screamed at Majic.

When Orphen turned to ask for an explanation, Majic suddenly blurted out, "I was the only one who made it out. I jumped into the garbage chute to escape the ghost, but Claiomh..."

He didn't finish that sentence. He didn't *want* to finish it, already on the verge of tears just thinking about it.

Orphen kicked at the fish on the floor. "If you're looking for Phonoghoulous, then here he is. Dead, as of a few minutes ago."

But the ghost, Sammy, was not convinced.

“THAT IS NoT PHONOGHOULOUS! iT IS a CReAtuRE!”

“Tch...”

Don't tell me... Phonoghoulous seriously turned himself into a Creature just so that Sammy would stop chasing him?

Orphen lowered his stance. He had no idea what sort of sorcery would be effective against a *Ghost*, but he wasn't about to go down without a fight.

Amidst all the commotion, he heard the door opening behind him. He turned around to find Philietta standing just behind him.

“So you've met him at last, have you, Orphen? Allow me to formally introduce you. This is Sammy... My *real* sponsor.”

Chapter V: The Fools Do Battle

Water continued to pour out from the broken tank. Philietta stood by the open door, watching as Orphen stood motionless between her and Sammy.

Orphen went over the situation in his head.

According to Phonoghoulous, there should be four Creatures running around outside right now. But I've only seen three...

Philietta, surprised that Orphen didn't react to her revelation in the slightest, spoke a little louder.

"Phonoghoulous worked on many Creatures, most of the time using animals or even inanimate objects as a base. But his ultimate goal never once changed. He was always determined to use human beings in the final stage of his horrible research."

"...And this was the unlucky fella who had to go through it, huh?" Orphen concluded, gesturing for Majic to stand behind him.

Sammy stood before them, his unstable figure phasing between human and black mist.

Philietta stepped into the room, drawing her dagger as she stopped by Orphen's side.

"That's right. In life, he was Sammy. Phonoghoulous' assistant, to whom he provided room and board. Now, he's just another one of those horrible Creatures. The last ever made... as well as the most *terrible* ever made."

"...Is he still conscious?" Orphen asked as he extended his right arm, preparing for battle at any moment.

Philietta hesitated for a brief moment before shaking her head. "Of course not. His body and brain are long since gone. The Creature is acting on pure instinct, attacking anyone it recognizes as a Sorcerer just in case that person is Phonoghoulous — like that!"

Following Philietta's warning, Orphen grabbed Majic by the shoulder and dragged the boy along with him towards the broken water tank. Orphen turned to see Philietta following close behind them, with Sammy speeding through the air where they'd been standing the moment before. He had rushed at them with such force, it felt like the underground room had been hit with a tornado. He broke up into mist when his ethereal form collided with the wall, leaving several massive cracks in the stone, which looked like it had just been hit with a massive hammer.

"I've got a lotta things I wanna ask you, but that'll have to come later," Orphen sighed.

Even this was one word too many, giving the mist a chance to reform briefly in the center of the room before charging at them again with blinding speed.

"I release thee, Sword of Light!" Orphen screamed at the figure.

A torrent of heat and light blasted Sammy apart before he could reach them. But it didn't take long for the mist to reform a third time.

"M-Master...?" cried a terrified Majic.

"What?" asked Orphen, growing impatient as he carefully watched Sammy's every move.

"How do you plan to kill a *ghost*?"

"That thing's no ghost. It's a Creature, a monster made for the sole purpose of mass murder."

"I don't care what it is! I'm asking you how we can beat it!"

"Don't ask me, ask Phonoghoulous," said Orphen, turning briefly back to the dead fish-man on the floor.

He had only said this as sarcasm, but Majic had apparently taken it seriously, possibly thinking that the man inside was still alive. He sighed and took a step towards Phonoghoulous, and Orphen moved as quickly as he could to try and stop the boy.

"Watch out!" he yelled as he pushed Majic away.

The dainty boy fell forward several steps, falling to his hands and knees in the

dirty water. He leaped back to his feet and turned to Orphen, yelling “What was *that* for?!” before noticing that another *thing* had appeared in the room right where he had just been standing.

It was a single *Hand* with knives for fingers — the Creature that Phonoghoulous had called Kenkrim.

“Urk...” Majic gulped. The eerie damp atmosphere of the basement only served to make the hand look even creepier.

Orphen straightened his arm and stood as though he was holding a sword. “I brandish thee, Blade of Demons!”

The next instant, an invisible weight materialized in his hand, as if he really had just drawn a sword. He swung the invisible blade towards Kenkrim. It made a loud noise as it cut deep into the stone floor, but Orphen could tell that it had missed its mark. He could only watch helplessly as the large *Hand* sank slowly back into the floor.

“Whoa!” came a yelp from Majic’s direction.

When Orphen turned to look, he saw something else emerging from the garbage chute. It looked like a bunch of long, thin black whips, but their movement was more reminiscent of tentacles. Without warning, they snapped to attention and flew out at Majic with tremendous force.

There was a loud, fleshy tearing noise as the whips flung dark blood up into the air. They had hit their mark perfectly... which was Phonoghoulous’ corpse at Majic’s feet. The huge fish was ripped cleanly in half, spraying cold blood all over Majic’s face.

“I release thee—” Orphen began to chant as he aimed at the garbage chute, but the whips were quicker to react. He knew that his attack wouldn’t make it on time.

I need to move! he screamed internally, but it was too late. The whips shot straight for his neck.

—*Shing!*—

The only thing that had kept Orphen from being beheaded was the blade of

Philietta's dagger. She had just barely managed to stop the whip, turning to Orphen with a nervous smile on her face. Orphen knew exactly what to do.

"I release thee, Sword of Light!"

The energy beam tore through the garbage chute, as well as a significant chunk of the ceiling. Rubble came tumbling down with a humanoid figure mixed in, the whole lot crashing to the ground with a heavy *thud*. The figure, as dirty as it was, was now clearly visible. A large, black suit of old fashioned armor.

Philietta pointed at the thing with the tip of her dagger.

"That's Accel. Watch out for him, he's dangerous."

"They're *all* dangerous!" yelled Majic helplessly as he rushed back over to Orphen's side.

You got that right, Orphen agreed. While he had been focused on the other Creatures, Sammy had recomposed himself in the center of the room.

"First we've got a bladed *Hand* that can pass through walls, then a suit of *Armor* that attacks with blinding speed using steel wires like whips, and to top it all off, there's a *Ghost* that's immune to any form of heat or shockwave-based attacks. Never mind a skilled Sorcerer, you'd need a whole *battalion* to take these things out. What do you expect *me* to do, huh?"

"I expect you to kill him," said Philietta without hesitation.

"You *what*?"

"That's why I brought you here. To kill him. I don't care what your name is, you're still the man that Childman raised as the successor of all his combat skills. You're the most skilled killer on the Continent, *Krylancelo*!"

"Huh?"

Majic didn't understand a thing that Philietta had just said. He looked blankly from Philietta, to Orphen, and then back again. Orphen ground his teeth and glared at the woman, who stood there with her dagger at the ready in case any of the Creatures made an abrupt move. She seemed to be waiting for Orphen to make a counter-argument, but he was smarter than to start an argument on the battlefield.

“...I’ve never been trained in fighting *Creatures*,” he said instead.

“Sammy was human.”

“Not anymore.”

Orphen cursed the situation that he’d found himself in. Sammy stood impatiently behind Accel, the black suit of armor, which itself stood there observing Orphen blankly. The *Hand* had vanished into the walls, but Orphen could still feel its presence somewhere nearby. No matter which one he went after first, the others would undoubtedly just wear him down until one of them caught him off-guard, and one mistake was all it would take to get everyone in the room slaughtered like pigs.

We need to get out of this room. They’ve got us backed up into a corner here. But more importantly...

Orphen wiped the sweat from his brow and muttered, “...Nobody else deserves to go through what Azalie had to suffer,” under his breath.

“What...?”

Apparently, he had said that louder than he had intended to, because both Majic and Philietta were taken aback.

He ignored their surprise and locked eyes with Majic, speaking as calmly as he possibly could under the circumstances. “Majic. About what you said earlier... did they really kill Claiomh?”

Majic held his hands up to his open mouth, seemingly regretting having told Orphen about that under the circumstances. He locked eyes with his master, and his expression sank solemnly. “...It’s true,” he said.

“I see...” was all Orphen could respond with. He turned to Philietta this time and said, “We’re getting out of here. We’re at a disadvantage in an enclosed space. Make a run for the exit as soon as I tell you to. Philietta, you go first. Majic, you follow her.”

“Not that I don’t agree with your plan...” Philietta added, biting her red lower lip, “...but there are *four* creatures in total, remember?”

Orphen flinched at Philietta’s words. He turned his gaze to the open doorway

and, sure enough, the fourth creature — Kiquime, the giant *Snake-Man* — stood motionlessly, blocking their only escape route.



“Urgh...”

Stark let out a groan as he came to his senses with a terrible, throbbing headache. He tried to get his bearings, only to find that it wasn’t just his head in pain, but his left shoulder, as well. The bleeding had long since stopped, but the raw wound still throbbed.

“Ah, shit,” he spat, pulling himself upright. He pressed one hand against his head and surveyed his surroundings. His vision was swallowed by the darkness. For a moment, he worried that he’d lost his sight, but after forcing himself to remain calm, he found his eyes gradually growing accustomed to the darkness.

He could make out the outlines of walls, a hard floor, and a roof, meaning he was indoors. The windows had been boarded up from the inside, sealing out almost all natural light. At first, he thought he was in some kind of storage room, but a quick glance around told him otherwise. While he had been collapsed on the floor, he noticed that there was, in fact, a bed in the room. At least, that was what he thought at first. Closer inspection revealed it to be more like a surgeon’s operating table. While the room had no permanent lighting fixtures installed, there was a hook still in the ceiling for hanging a gas lantern on. Luckily, there was no need for a gas lamp, as there was a hole in the roof just large enough to let some of the afternoon sunlight into the room, along with a peek at the blue sky above.

The room was fairly spacious, and from the looks of the roof, it was presumably on the second floor. The corners of the room were piled high with various types of junk, but here and there were cabinets and tables of what looked like medical and surgical equipment.

“I wonder if this was an operating room...” Stark muttered aloud. If so, then perhaps this was some kind of abandoned hospital.

He reached for the sword on his waist and began looking around cautiously. The last thing he could remember was being assaulted by that ghost and its freaky monster companions. Then he was caught up in a small tornado that the

ghost had caused, which had probably thrown him quite some distance, meaning the hole in the roof was likely caused by him when he came crashing back down to earth. Still, it was highly unlikely that a small tornado had carried him *that* far, so he was probably still somewhere in Kink Hall Village.

“Wait a minute.” Stark suddenly had a thought. “That ghost mentioned Phonoghoulous... the Heretic. If I remember right, his mansion was supposed to be somewhere around Kink Hall Village. Don’t tell me that’s where I’ve been taken to...?”

As soon as Stark took a step forward, he felt something crumbling beneath his foot. He turned down reluctantly to see what had caused that unpleasant sensation. What he found was... a large clump of dust. Sticking out of the clump here and there were tiny little bones. Cat bones, to be precise. But something was... *off* about them.

“They’ve been here so long they’re crumbling into dust, but what the hell is this? Do the cats around here all have five legs or something?”

He knew very well that this couldn’t possibly be the case, but he didn’t care enough to look into it any further. More importantly, the surgery table in the middle of the room had caught his attention. He noticed that someone was laying on it.

When he drew closer, he saw that it was the same girl he had met — and been kicked in the face by — in the village not so long ago. She lay atop the operating table with closed eyes and hands clasped in front of her chest, totally unmoving. It didn’t even look like she was breathing.



What happened to her...? I don't see a single wound on her.

Out of morbid curiosity, Stark placed one finger against the girl's neck. After standing like that for a while, he sighed heavily.

"Yup, she's dead... But... what is this...?"

He wasn't sure, but something bugged him about all of this. She had no pulse, of that he was certain. Her body temperature, too, while warmer than room temperature, was also unnaturally cold for a human being.

And yet, something just felt... *off*. Had she been laying there with a knife in her chest, he wouldn't have thought it unnatural in the slightest. But as she was, Stark couldn't discern any reasonable cause of death. If she had suffocated to death, then there was no way she would be laying there with such a peaceful look on her face. She didn't seem to have broken her spine, either. If she had died of shock, then it was strange that her eyes were closed. People that had died from gas poisoning or hypothermia were often found in a state not entirely unlike this, but nobody would be freezing to death on such a warm day right around early summer, and if she had died of gas poisoning, then it didn't make sense that Stark was still alive when he had awoken right next to her. The only possibility left was that she had died from some kind of disease, but Stark didn't even want to *consider* the possibility that he'd gotten his ass kicked by a sickly little girl on the verge of death.

"Well, whatever..." Stark sighed, sheathing his sword so that he could pick the girl up off the operating table. He figured that the only possible conclusion to draw was that she had been killed by some method unknown to him, but more importantly, he wouldn't be able to sleep at night if he left a young girl's corpse behind in a freaky haunted mansion like this.

Holding the unexpectedly light girl in both arms, Stark took another look around the room. It didn't take him long to spot the doorway. Having found what he presumed to be the exit, though, he briefly paused to wonder if there might be traps waiting for him in a mansion like this one. As if supporting his intuition, the scar on his right hand throbbed slightly.

Just then, he noticed something he had overlooked until now. Almost perfectly hidden behind a pile of junk was something that he could have sworn

looked like a well, if not for the fact that they were indoors. He walked over to it and peered down slightly, only to find...

—*BOOM!*—

The explosion was accompanied by a bright flash of light from the bottom of the hole.

“That was sorcery!” Stark remarked, his voice overlapping with another, yelling, “They’re *all* dangerous!”

He heard the voice clear as day. It was the apprentice Sorcerer that had been with the girl in his arms when he ran into them in the village.

“...There’s a battle going on down there?” he wondered aloud, taking another peek down the hole. “Judging by the distance of that explosion, they must be... in the basement. And from the power of the blast, there was no way it was that brat. So *that’s* where my target’s been — Whoa!”

Something crashed into Stark, sending him stumbling a few steps backwards. He looked away from the hole to see what it was, only to find that the black mist had chased him down.

The mist clearly seemed to have noticed Stark, too, as it expanded to fill every corner of the room, squirming unpleasantly all the while. In the confusion, Stark had ended up dropping the young girl’s corpse. He cursed his clumsiness, but there was no helping it. While it pained him to leave the dead girl behind, he had his own life to worry about now.

“Shit!” he swore, reaching for his sword... only to find that it wasn’t in its sheath.

“Where the hell did it go?!”

Just as Stark screamed out in panic, the mist before him split in two right down the middle. He could see his own sword reflecting what little light was shining into the room, as its new wielder thrust the weapon out at his chest...



“...When faced with an opponent who significantly outclasses yourself in every way — an opponent that you *must* defeat at any costs — what do you

believe is the correct course of action to take, Krylancelo?”

The terrifyingly calm, emotionless voice called out from the shadows of his mind. It was a lesson he had been given by none other than Childman, the strongest Black Sorcerer that the Continent had ever known.

Orphen — still going by Krylancelo at the time — hadn’t been able to come up with an answer to what seemed like a trick question from his Master, saying only that he didn’t know.

In response, Childman shrugged his shoulders as though the answer was obvious.

“It’s simple,” he said. “You cheat.”

Shit, I just had to go and remember, Orphen cursed his own carelessness. They were trapped between Sammy and the *Armor* standing in front of them with the pile of wooden crates behind them. The *Snake-Man* guarded the only exit. And the unseen *Hand* was still present; though hiding, Orphen could make out its presence somewhere nearby.

“I went and remembered,” Orphen said aloud.

“Huh?” Majic was confused. Not only did he have no idea what his Master was talking about, but the situation had devolved so rapidly that he had clung to Philietta’s waist out of fear, not even noticing as she turned to look down at him like she was being made to babysit a clingy child.

Orphen grinned bitterly as he removed his bandanna.

“And because I’ve remembered... It means I’m not gonna be able to stay ‘Orphen’ for the next little while.”

Ignoring his disciple’s puzzled gaze, Orphen thrust his bandanna into Majic’s hand. He also took off his jacket and handed that over, too. Last but not least... he took off his pendant and held it in his hand.

The pendant was of a one-legged dragon wrapped around a downwards-pointing sword. It was the proof that one had been recognized as a skilled Black Sorcerer by the prestigious Tower of Fangs. On the dragon’s back, between its

outstretched wings — on the reverse side of the pendant, in other words — the wielder's name was carved. His own pendant had been engraved with the name 'Krylancelo' — a name that had since gone on to become known all throughout the Continent, having reached the status of an urban legend.

Orphen took that silver pendant and handed it over to Majic, as well.

"Master...?"

Majic looked down at the things he had been given and wondered what was going on.

Orphen turned his gaze back to Sammy and explained, "If I die here, take that pendant to the Tower of Fangs. Ask for Childman's student Forte Puckingham. Say you'd like him to be your instructor. If you let him know you've been studying under me, then he won't turn you away."

"Master, don't say that!" Majic yelped as his bright green eyes grew wide with shock. "You're not gonna die, we're all gonna make it out of this—!"

"Relax, would you? I said *if* I die. I'm just hedging my bets here."

With that out of the way, Orphen turned to Philietta next.

"I'll take care of the *Snake-Man*. While I've got it distracted, take Majic and get the hell out of here."

"...How do you plan on taking care of it, exactly?" Philietta asked, a lone bead of sweat trailing down her cheek.

Orphen didn't tell her. "If I told you my plan, they'd overhear everything. Just leave it to me. I'll get all of their eyes pointing in my direction."

"You can't seriously be planning on fighting all of these Creatures all on your own."

"Not like I have much choice."

"Don't be ridiculous. You need all the backup you can get."

...Oh hell, she sounds just like Claiomh, Orphen thought to himself with a hollow smile.

"I'll be fine," he said. His response left Philietta at a complete loss for words.

Majic rushed in from the side. “There’s no way you’ll be fine! Just *look* at those monsters!”

“I said I’ll be fine,” Orphen repeated in emotionless tones reminiscent of his old master. “I’ll Stab every last one of these Creatures.”

Stab. That was the Tower’s word for *assassinate*. Majic had no way of knowing about that. He simply stared at his Master, trying to come up with a way to dissuade him.

“Why do you need to do something like that, anyway?! These monsters have nothing to do with you!”

“You said it yourself. They killed Claiomh.”

“Wha...?!” Majic was taken completely aback. “Master, are you saying... you’re going to get revenge for her...?”

“These bastards killed Claiomh. I’m gonna make them feel every last ounce of the sin weighing on them.”

With these as his parting words, Orphen made a mad dash across the flooded basement room. He went straight for Sammy. Seeing this, the Armor turned to face him ever so slowly.

“Orphen!”

“Master!”

Orphen ignored both of his companions and yelled something himself. “I’m over here, Sammy!”

He thrust his right hand into the Armor’s face as he ran past it.

“It’s me! *Phonoghoulous!*”

He charged his words into a spell, blasting the Armor in the face at point-blank range. He could tell that his attack hadn’t dealt much damage, but the force of the blast was still enough to send the two hundred kilogram armor flying several meters backwards. It fell to the ground with a heavy metallic crash.

Orphen didn’t miss a beat. He kept charging straight for Sammy, whose

expression had stiffened considerably.

“THAT’s HIM! It’S PHONOGHOULOUS! *Kill Him!!*” Sammy screamed as emphatically as he could.

—*Hissss!*—

From behind, Orphen could hear the Snake-Man hissing in response to Sammy’s words. Just as planned.

I knew it, he told himself, Sammy can control these Creatures!

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

Orphen focused all the energy in his body into that one attack, the sheer explosive force proving enough to scatter Sammy back into mist far more effectively than any previous attack.

Mid-attack, Orphen spun himself so that he was facing the doorway. The *Snake-Man* that had been standing like a sentinel until then made a mad dash along the ground, its gangly limbs giving it an awkward, but unmistakably fast, gait. It rushed straight past Majic and Philietta, then opened its rugby-ball-shaped head to reveal the inside of its mouth.

—*Hiss!*—

The Snake-Man spat some yellowish liquid at Orphen, who just barely managed to dodge it in time. White smoke began to rise from the concrete as soon as the liquid made contact with it. It fizzled away and dissolved with startling speed.

That’s some crazy venom!

Orphen took note of the deadly liquid as he skidded beneath the Snake-Man’s hulking frame. He leaped back to his feet behind the Creature and lightly placed one hand on its back.

“I gaze upon thee, Princess of Chaos!”

A vortex of gravity came thundering down upon the Snake-Man’s back, pinning it helplessly to the ground.

Orphen predicted where the next attack would come from, managing to jump

into the air just a split second before Kenkrim the Hand could grab hold of his ankle. Having missed its mark, the Hand sank back into the ground once more.

Orphen landed and turned to face the outwitted Creatures once more. When he looked around, he saw that thankfully Majic and Philietta had listened to him and left the room. When he strained his ears, he could hear their footsteps as they rushed back up the stone stairs out of the basement.

His gaze still fixed on the Creatures, he realized that none of them had taken any real damage in that melee just now. The *Armor* rose to its feet as sluggishly as ever; the *Snake-Man* turned its head over its shoulder to lock eyes with Orphen; Sammy had reformed again in exactly the same position; and the *Hand* remained nowhere to be seen.

Left alone with the Creatures at last, Orphen stood before them and crossed his arms. He stared Sammy down with an intimidating glare.

“Don’t get full of yourselves. I’m not gonna be holding back from here on out. Just so you know...”

Orphen let all of his bloodlust show on his face.

“...I am *seething with rage* right now.”

Chapter VI: And Thus They Are Fools No Longer

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

A beam of heat and light hit the *Snake-Man* right in the side of the head. It was thrown sideways like it had just been bashed across the head with a massive hammer. Orphen did not relent.

“—Sword of Light!”

A second attack tore across the full length of the Creature’s body like a literal sword of light.

“I release thee, Sword of Light!!”

By the time Orphen launched the third attack, the temperature of the room had risen by several degrees, and the torrents of light were now leaving trails of flames in their path. The heat was many times what any gas cooker or wildfire could ever produce, yet the *Snake-Man* seemed completely unaffected.

This didn’t matter to Orphen, though. Having heated the room sufficiently, he jumped backwards once, twice, three times, straight out of the underground room. As soon as he was on the other side of the steel door, he slammed it shut and held both hands up against it.

“I seal thee shut, Brink of the Boundary!”

The door made a tremendously heavy noise as it became one with the surrounding walls. *Now, just to make sure...*

“I bestow upon thee, the Blessing of the Giants!”

The door shook and convulsed as it expanded ever-so-slightly in size, embedding itself into the walls even more steadfast than before.

Orphen exhaled and wiped the sweat from his face.

“There we go. This won’t do much to Sammy or the others, but as long as that Snake bastard’s a living organism, then it’s about to suffocate to death inside a giant oven.”

Having sealed himself outside of the room, Orphen now found himself on the landing at the bottom of the stairs in total darkness. He felt a mysterious pang of fear, having been thrust out of the light so abruptly, so he took his hands off the door and tried to steady his breathing.

But before he could take a moment to compose himself...

—*Fssshh!*—

The sound was like a damp cloth being torn down the middle. Orphen could see a strange yellow substance leaking through the stone walls around the doorway, accompanied by a horrendous stench. The wall melted away even as he stood there, and eventually, the massive steel door came crashing down right in front of him.

“Whoa!”

Orphen leaped backwards just in time to avoid being crushed by the door. When he gazed back into the room, he saw the *Snake-Man* standing completely unharmed, yellow venom dripping from its mouth. Behind it, he could see that the flames had died down, leaving the dim ball of light as the only source of illumination.

“Shit,” swore a dumbfounded Orphen. “What the hell’s going on here? I fired enough spells into that bastard to tear a hole in the side of a fortress!”

Alas, the *Snake-Man* was apparently more resilient than even a fortress. Still, there was no way it was *completely* unharmed after all of that. Even ignoring external damage, the shockwaves should have done a number on its internal organs by now, and no matter how strong a living organism was, it wouldn’t be able to survive having its heart crushed.

... *Hang on a second*, Orphen realized, *I’ve experienced this before. Philietta’s bodysuit! Shit, that thing’s immune to sorcery!*

Orphen recalled Philietta’s strange bodysuit and how she had been able to withstand a Sword of Light at point-blank range, despite being an ordinary human being. While he stood there, going over the facts in his head, the *Snake-Man* moved gradually closer to him.

Wait... Don’t tell me Philietta’s a Creature, too...?

Having closed the distance, the Creature opened its mouth.

Orphen knew what was coming next. He tried to jump backwards to dodge the venom, but he hadn't reacted fast enough. He couldn't lift his leg.

What the—?!

A chill ran down his spine as he gazed down at his ankles, only to find *the Hand* gripping tightly to his boot. He had iron plates in his boots for exactly this kind of situation, but while that had saved his leg, the Creature was still gripping him down with enough force to prevent him from running away.

Unable to flee, he was showered in highly acidic venom.

“Nnngggrrrr...!”

It was almost a miracle that he was able to keep himself from screaming. He had just barely managed to twist his body enough to stop the venom from melting his face off, but it still burned through his left shoulder and down the front of his chest. The horrific smell of burning clothes and melting flesh filled his nostrils. The venom ate all the way through to his pink muscles, and he was assaulted by — almost drowning in — the pain of his skin dissolving. Yellowish smoke rose from his body and left a ghastly wound across his chest.

“I... REPAIR... THEE...”

Orphen slapped his right hand against his shoulder, wincing at the pain. If he had screamed when he had been attacked, he almost certainly would not have been able to catch enough breath to even cast this spell.

“Scars of the Sunset!”

Physical pain was horrific, but treatable. Mental damage, on the other hand, was not so easy to deal with. If Orphen had been forced to fight while shouldering such a hideous wound, he may very well have died of shock midway through the fight.

This was why he put top priority on healing himself rather than trying to break free. His shirt remained in tatters, but his flesh regenerated to seal up the wound.

Feeling the spell working with blinding efficiency, Orphen turned his hand

away from his shoulder and towards the *Snake-Man*.

“I call upon thee, Sisters of Destruction!”

An invisible shockwave sent the Creature flying. Orphen had deliberately made the spell flow in both directions, though, sending himself hurtling through the air as well. He could feel every bone and organ in his body being shaken up like water in a bottle, but he had needed to generate at least that much force in order to free himself from the *Hand's* grip.

Orphen readied his next move even as he landed on his back partway up the stairs. He pointed one finger out towards the *Snake-Man* and screamed, “Guide my path, Deathsong Starling!”

A dull supersonic wave assaulted the Creature. Its body contorted unnaturally, and it was thrown to the ground like a child's toy being cast aside.

I knew it, thought Orphen, It's just like with Philetta. Its skin is ridiculously tough, but its organs are basically unprotected.

A single weakness. What was a single weakness worth?

...An infinite number of ways to win. This, too, was something he had learned from Master Childman.

Come to think of it, Phonoghoulous called these Creatures 'failures.' Which means that each one of them must have some crucial weakness crippling it from being truly invincible.

“C'mon, Sammy! It's me, Phonoghoulous! I'm running upstairs!!” he yelled behind himself as he dashed up the stone staircase and away from Phonoghoulous' underground chamber. He felt the need to provoke the *Ghost* once more, figuring that its memory might not be the most reliable, and he had to keep its attention on him.

At the same time, he had needed to cast a light spell so that he could see in front of himself, so he used his provocation against Sammy as the medium for this. A will-o'-the-wisp floated out of his right hand and led him to the top of the staircase. He reached the top and barreled out onto the landing without once stopping to look back.

He leaped to the side so that he didn't have his back to the enemies, and not a moment too soon. The *Armor's* black whips chased him out of the opening and tore several dozen centimeters into the wall directly in front of it, latching on like a multitude of gruesome tentacles.

Orphen almost shouted in surprise when he realized what was going on. The *Armor* was using its whips to *drag itself up the stairs* at blinding speeds, like a massive, several-hundred-kilogram speeding bullet. The noise of the metal bouncing and ricocheting off the walls and stairs as it grew closer was terrifying enough in and of itself.

The *Armor* came flying out of the stairwell like a cannonball being fired, coming to a halt only after crashing into the corridor wall. Completely unharmed, it turned to face Orphen.

Watching the thing closely, Orphen saw the helmet open up slightly. He moved as quickly as his body would allow.

"I dance through thee, Corridors of Heaven!"

Orphen's vision shifted as he teleported himself to a location a couple of meters away. As soon as his vision corrected itself, he heard a whistling noise and watched something twinkling in the light as it shot out of the *Armor's* face. It tore into the air before him, just barely missing.

Steel wires—!

The light that he had summoned to guide his path lit up the enemy's weapon, making it clearly visible before him. While it wouldn't have been enough to take his whole arm, it could easily have sliced off a couple of fingers if it had hit him. If he were close enough for it to wrap around his neck, though, then it might even have beheaded him. There was no way he could risk trying to block that attack; he had to evade it at all costs.

That Phonoghoulous made one pain in the ass Creature, I'll give him that, Orphen cursed internally.

He felt a dull pain in his brow. One of the wires must have just barely nicked him, because he could feel warm blood trickling down his face. The sensation only made him more irritated. If he had been the person he was back when he

lived at the Tower — if he were *Krylancelo* — then he never would have taken this much damage from such petty scuffles.

I've grown... weak, he realized. But that wasn't enough to stop him.

“You bastards killed Claiomh, so I'm gonna send you straight to the depths of hell even if I have to drag you down with me!”

He saw the *Armor* winding up for a follow-up attack and moved to intercept.

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

The force knocked the *Armor* off balance, which Orphen used as his chance to escape. He had the will-o'-the-wisp light his path through the corridors so he could make it back to the mansion's entrance.

We'll settle this in front of the Goddess, he decided. *But can I really do this alone? Sorry, Claiomh. Looks like you were right, after all. I really could've used your help here.*

Wordless, he dashed through the corridors, retracing his steps as he lured his opponents into a trap.





“Is that the truth, Worker A?”

“It’s Hershel.”

“So, it’s not the truth?”

“My *name* is Hershel. Hershel Lewis,” said Worker A, pointing to himself.

Dortin watched the whole exchange. Unfortunately for the poor boy, his name would probably be ‘Worker A’ to Volkan forevermore. He wasn’t the kind of person to bother learning other people’s names.

“A warrior has no need of the past! Discard your name and embrace your new title!”

That’s one way of saying you don’t care, Dortin shrugged, not daring to say a thing out loud. Instead, he stared up at the new flag his brother had made. Where he kept getting these sheets was anyone’s guess, but he had procured a second sheet and written something else on this one: *‘Volkan’s Theater’s Second Official Rally! Apologize to the Merciless Moneylender and if That Doesn’t Work, Run For Your Lives!’*

Hershel wasn’t as timid as Dortin, though.

“How am I supposed to introduce myself without a name?”

“Easy,” said Volkan, who spun around and stuck his finger out at one of the five boys, “introduce yourself as Worker A!”

“But I’m not Worker A, I’m Wes.”

“Oh right, *you* were Worker A —”

“I’m Michael...”

“Then *you*!”

“I’m Rambeldt.”

“What about you?”

“Toby.”

“Argh, blast you all! Then it has to be you!”

“I told you before, my name is Kauffman.”

“Well you can’t expect me to remember *all* of your names!”

Volkan was about to snap when Dortin tugged on his cloak from behind.

“What do *you* want, *Dortin*?!”

“That was more names than we have members...”

“...”

Volkan paused for a moment and attempted to count up the names and faces. The sun was beginning to set, and the wind felt nice on his face. The birds were chirping, and the gears in Volkan’s head may or may not have been turning. Some time passed before, at long last, “You little runts! Thought you could make fun of *me*, didja?!”

Volkan snapped and made to chase after the children, who scattered and all went running in different directions. Dortin stayed behind and watched his brother run in circles chasing after them before shifting his gaze over to the large abandoned mansion looming over them.

It was the one and only ‘haunted mansion’ from the story that Hershel (or Toby or Kauffman or whatever his name was) had been telling to all of the inn’s guests. If nothing else, the haunted mansion lived up to its reputation in appearance. The windows had all been boarded up from the inside, and it was impossible to tell how long it had been standing empty.

Volkan had managed to glean information out of the townsfolk that this was where the ghost that attacked them had come from. Although, Dortin thought the connection should have been obvious enough to figure out without having to ask other people about it. The only reason that Volkan had dragged them all here was because he thought that if they could save Claiomh before the moneylending Sorcerer found out about it, he might be able to avoid being fed to giant Snake-Men.

“If you guys don’t cut it out, I’ll enlighten you to death!”

Volkan was kicking the last of the fleeing children to the ground (typical of Volkan to only be confident and strong against a group of actual children) when

Dortin turned back around. He raised his flag triumphantly to signal his victory.

“Alright, now listen up, workers! My life is on the line, and completing this rally is the only way to keep Volkan’s Theater up and running! That moneylender isn’t as innocent as he pretends to be! When I say he’ll kill me for this, I mean it! He once strung me up by the boots from the top of a clock tower just because I bumped into him while walking down the street!”

This was actually true. Dortin had watched it happen. But Volkan had left out one key detail: At the time, Orphen had been working as a scientist’s assistant, and Volkan had gone barreling into him from behind when he was carrying a basin full of concentrated sulphuric acid down the street. Anyone would’ve gotten angry after that.

Just then, the mansion’s front door swung open and somebody came running out. Majic’s blond hair was a mess, and his clothes were covered in moss.

“Huh? What are you guys doing here?” he asked when he noticed Dortin.

“Well, you see...”

Dortin pointed to the flag that Volkan was waving around.

“Oh... That makes sense,” said Majic. He was out of breath, having just made a mad dash to escape the haunted mansion. “Did anyone else come out before I did?”

“Eh?”

“There was a woman with me until a little while ago, but we got separated and I haven’t been able to find her. She’s wearing a black bodysuit; it’s hard to miss her.”

“I haven’t seen her, I’m afraid...” said Dortin with a shake of the head.

“Oh no... I hope Master doesn’t yell at me...”

“Looks like we’re not the only ones in a sticky situation right now.”

While Majic and Dortin were trading information, something else was going on directly above them.

—*Smash!*—

One of the second floor windows exploded into shards, and the wooden boards were shattered into splinters, all of which came raining down into the front garden. A large figure came crashing down to the ground amidst the debris.

The man crashed into the ground with tremendous force, sent rolling even after he landed. He finally grew dead still just a short distance away.

“It’s... that assassin!” yelled Dortin, terrified.

The hired assassin, Stark, tried to pull himself to his feet while pressing his right hand to his injured left shoulder. Dortin turned to Majic, as if begging for his life. Between all of them, Majic was really the only one who could reasonably stand a chance against another Sorcerer.

The children — or workers, or whatever — all froze in place. Volkan, naturally, reacted exactly the same way.

Stark didn’t seem to notice them, though.

“What the hell *is* that girl...?”

That was all Stark could force out before he fell unconscious on the spot.

“Eh?”

Dortin was thoroughly confused. Every last member of Volkan’s Theater looked down at the unconscious assassin, and not one of them had a clue what was going on.



Whips continued to chase after Orphen even as he ran into the hall. He just barely managed to keep dodging them on pure instinct alone. He couldn’t afford a single moment to stop and plan his next move. If he didn’t propel himself out of range of those whips, he wouldn’t *have* a next move to make.

It had been two hours since Orphen had stepped through the front door into this quiet little main hall at the entrance, and it stood just as deserted as it had then. The only difference was that now the *Armor’s* loud footsteps echoed throughout the building, which had turned out to be not so abandoned after all.

Orphen ran to the foot of the Goddess statue, as it was the only obstacle in

the room that he could use to hide from the whips that chased him so relentlessly. The Goddess almost looked like she was smiling upon him in his hour of need.

When Orphen peeked around the statue to analyze his pursuer, what he saw was not the *Armor*, but instead the *Snake-Man*. It made sense. The *Snake-Man* was far more swift and agile than the slow, clunky *Armor*. Without even pausing to search for him, the Creature made straight for Orphen's location with a shrill screech.

Shit! That thing still has a snake's sense of smell!

Orphen leaped out of the shadow of the Goddess and cast a spell.

"I gaze upon thee, Princess of Chaos!"

A shadow deeper than the darkness of the main hall pressed down upon the *Snake-Man* forcing it to the ground. Since he couldn't deal it any external wounds, knocking it down with sheer brute force was the logical course of action. The Creature had tried to spit venom at Orphen, but the sudden force had knocked its head back, sending the acid straight up into the air, where it fell back down and missed its target completely.

Orphen dashed over to the Creature and put his hand up against its throat.

"I tear through thee, Wall of Wind!"

The dense blade of air cut into the *Snake-Man's* neck, making it open its mouth on reflex. Without a moment's hesitation, Orphen thrust his hand down the Creature's throat.

"Later, nerd."

And to finish it off...

"I call upon thee, Sisters of Destruction!"

It was over in an instant. As Orphen's spell tore through the *Snake-Man*, it ripped apart all of the Creature's internal organs, expelling blood and mucus and chunks of meat from its mouth, nose, and eye sockets. He wiped the blood from his face and pulled his left fist back out of the creature's throat. He pulled the glove off before the venom could finish eating through it and start

dissolving his skin.

“That’s one down.”

Orphen shifted his gaze from the *Snake-Man’s* corpse back to the corridor, where he saw the black *Armor* standing there, waiting for him with open arms.

“What the...?”

Before Orphen had a chance to wonder what the Creature was doing, the front of the suit burst open to reveal dozens of black ropes all tangled up inside the thing in place of organs. That was all of the contents of the *Armor*.

Every last rope shot out at him all at once.

“Shit!” he yelled as he flung the *Snake-Man’s* now incredibly light corpse at the *Armor* to defend himself.

Even the sharp whips couldn’t tear through the other Creature’s skin, but the force of the attack was enough to send the carcass flying over to the other side of the room.

Orphen used the opening that he had created to close the distance between himself and the *Armor*, where he then attacked the thing while its guard was wide open.

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

He fired an energy beam into the *Armor’s* insides, but it had as little effect as when he’d attacked the outside. The force knocked it back slightly, but that was the extent of the damage. The *Snake-Man* had been easy enough to defeat once Orphen had realized that its internal organs were unprotected, but the *Armor* apparently didn’t share that weakness.

In that case, he reasoned, the only way to beat it is by crushing the body completely.

This wasn’t a sure thing, but it was the best bet that Orphen could come up with.

Before the Creature could resume its attack, Orphen dove back behind the Goddess statue. He was already drenched in sweat, and his breath had grown ragged.

I'm at my limits. I've never cast so many spells in such a short span of time before.

Orphen realized that he couldn't waste any more spells on futile attacks. If he couldn't finish this enemy off within the next couple of attacks, he was done for either way.

Exhausted, he placed one hand on the surface of the Goddess statue... only to realize his mistake a moment too late.

“— Shit!” he yelled as the *Hand* grabbed his left wrist with bladed fingers.

He could only watch as the blades sunk into his skin, because trying to pull away carelessly would only lose him a limb for the trouble. He stood helplessly as the *Hand* refused to let go, pulling on him as if trying to drag him inside the statue itself.

Orphen grabbed the fingers with his right hand and tried to pry them away, but the Creature wasn't about to let go. He just wasn't strong enough to pry himself out of its grasp.

He turned to look at the *Armor*, which was already rising back to its feet. At this rate, he wouldn't be able to dodge another attack from those whips.

I've got no other choice!

Orphen gripped onto *the Hand's* fingers as tightly as he could with his free hand.

“I dance through thee —”

The *Armor's* chest plate flung open.

“— Corridors of Heaven!”

His vision blurred for a moment.

Orphen teleported himself to just below the entrance hall's ceiling, almost ten meters in the air. He had never succeeded in jumping that far before, even when he was in peak condition. He could only gaze down helplessly at the ground as he waited for gravity to kick in, and he had no footing at all to kick himself in any other direction.

He looked down at *the Hand* still gripping him, and the sight was totally unexpected. Past the wrist, the *Hand* was connected to a thick arm that looked more like a shaved gorilla than a human. The arm was, in turn, connected to three tube-like appendages twice as thick as its fingers, and those tubes were connected to something that resembled a brain. This was *the Hand*, Kenkrim, in its entirety.

Kenkrim had probably been using a variation of teleportation sorcery to allow itself to move through walls, but this high in the air, there was nowhere for it to run. Orphen grabbed hold of the tubes as he fell to the ground and ripped them right out of the brain they were connected to. Severed from its center of command, *the Hand* fell away, limp and lifeless.

Barely a second had passed since Orphen had teleported himself into the air, and now he fell down straight towards the Goddess statue's head. On the way down, he grabbed hold of the statue as firmly as he could and cast one last spell with all the energy left in his body.

Please work...!

"I release thee, Sword of Light!"

He aimed his attack not at the *Armor* below, but instead at the feet of the Goddess statue. The blast tore into the ground and right through the statue's legs, causing it to fall over like a tree that had been chopped down.

Orphen swung all of his body weight in order to lead the statue's descent straight towards the *Armor*. It was hard to say if this had any effect on the three ton block of stone, but he successfully managed to bring it all crashing down right on top of the remaining Creature.

He was thrown from the statue's head as it fell to the ground, sent rolling helplessly along the floor. He pulled himself to his feet in a fit of coughing, the *Armor* nowhere in sight. It had been crushed flat like a can beneath a giant boot.

That takes care of three, Orphen thought, which means Sammy's the only one left.

Sammy, however, hadn't shown himself since Orphen had sealed the

underground room's door shut. Orphen found this strange. If Sammy had just attacked while he was busy trying to deal with the other three, he wouldn't have stood a fighting chance.

Is he planning something...? Does he still have that much intelligence left?

Then again, Phonoghoulous had created the Creatures as war machines. It wasn't too far-fetched to assume that Sammy's intelligence had merely been *restricted* to the subject of combat, leaving it the one subject he could still think clearly about.

After taking a moment to steady his breathing and calm his rapidly beating heart, Orphen finally pulled himself back to his feet. He cast his gaze around the entrance hall, which had now lost the only defining feature it had had, the towering Goddess statue.

He caught sight of someone stepping out of the shadows from the opposite side of the room than where the Creatures had come from. The woman walked over to him, apparently having been watching the battle and waiting for a good moment to show herself. As though her tall figure, long black hair, and black bodysuit weren't definitive enough, she began clapping to applaud Orphen's victory.

"...Where's Majic?" mumbled Orphen.

"I helped him escape. He should be outside by now. Before you scold me for coming back, I *did* make sure he wasn't going to follow me, alright?"

Philietta giggled as she explained herself to Orphen.

"Whatever you say," Orphen shrugged. "So why'd you come back? Just to get your kicks off watching me fight from the comfort of a safe place?"

"I was actually planning to jump out and help if I saw an opening," said Philietta as she turned to look at the fallen Goddess statue. "Looks like you didn't need my help after all, though."

"You're in high spirits," grumbled Orphen.

He gripped his injured left arm with his right hand, as though trying to hide the wound, and winced not from the pain — his arm had grown numb already

— but instead at the sickening sensation of blood all over his skin. The cuts weren't nearly as deep as they looked, which was good news. Orphen hadn't yet recovered enough to even cast a healing spell on himself.

Philietta shrugged as she walked over to his side.

"Of course I am. I just found out that I was right to pick you for the job."

"That so?" he said sarcastically.

"It is. You just proved what I had suspected all along. You really are the best Sorcerer on the Continent. Right up there with Childman the legend."

"...Can it, will ya?" he spat in return. "Besides, I've only taken care of three of them. Sammy's still hiding somewhere, and I'm well past my limits —"

While the two were talking, a door creaked open somewhere.

They only noticed when they heard it closing again. Light footsteps echoed through the building. Orphen cut his words short and strained his ears to try and figure out where the sound was coming from. It didn't take long for him to figure out that someone was approaching from the second floor. The light that he had conjured up still illuminated the main hall, but it didn't reach that far, so he had no way of making out who it was. He stole a glance at Philietta, who seemed to have noticed the sound as well, but the lady assassin simply stood there with her arms crossed.

"That can't be Sammy," said Orphen, "because he's never had footsteps before. Are you sure there's not another Creature walking around?"

If there was, then the fight was over before it even began. Orphen simply didn't have the strength left to deal with another one.

Philietta shook her head. She turned to Orphen, calm as could be, and said, "Do you know why Sammy is the strongest among the Creatures?"

"...It's not because of his combat abilities?"

Philietta shrugged and explained that that wasn't all there was to it.

"He can appear out of thin air, and he's completely immune to any of our attacks... but even Accel, Kiquime, and Kenkrim shared those traits to a degree. Sammy's real power was that he could *control* those Creatures that were

supposed to have gone berserk.”

“Wait, then you mean...”

Orphen tried to process these words as Philietta drew her dagger and held it at the ready.

“I don’t know how he does it, but Sammy can take control of *any* living organism and manipulate them to his will. What was it that boy Majic said? That your other partner had been killed?”

Just then, the footsteps drew to a halt.

When Orphen cast his gaze back up to the stairs, he saw that the person had stepped out into the light. The thin blonde girl stood there with a lifeless expression on her face.

Orphen felt something inside of him being revived once more.

“Claiomh? Is that really you?”

The girl was Claiomh, without a doubt, but there was something strange about her. Orphen didn’t know where she had found it, but she was gripping a military saber in her right hand. Her hair swayed gently in the breeze. There shouldn’t have been any wind because they were indoors, but Orphen had been firing off so many spells non-stop that he had inadvertently created an air current inside the building. Her noble facial expression was ice cold, and the life had been drained from her eyes, making it seem like Claiomh was sleepwalking. To top it off, Orphen even recognized the clothes she was wearing — they had been Majic’s clothes at some point, before Claiomh had taken a liking to them.

It was Claiomh. It was definitely her, but...

Philietta turned to Orphen and said, “Don’t worry, she’s still alive. Just as long as you don’t accidentally kill her, that is.”

“As if I would!” snapped Orphen.

The second he’d turned his gaze away from Claiomh, the young girl leaped down from the landing and down to the ground floor. She was now only a few steps away from Orphen, holding the saber in one hand and poised to attack.

Did she just clear those stairs in a single jump? Orphen wondered

incredulously.

He just barely managed to leap back before Claiomh swiped at him with terrifying speed, leaving a trail of silver light in the sword's wake. Before he could run a second time, Claiomh reversed the sword's trajectory and cut upwards towards the space between Orphen's ear and his jaw.

Orphen's breath caught in his throat, and he half-dodged, half-tripped out of the way of this follow-up attack. The sword cut through the air next to his ear with such force that it threatened to rupture his eardrum. Things almost seemed to be moving in slow motion as Claiomh charged at him a third time with not a moment's pause between attacks.

She's gonna kill me! screamed Orphen internally.

If his opponent had been anyone but Claiomh, then he might've charged at them out of reflex to stab his fingers into their eyes in an attempt to blind them.

Feeling that he'd finally reached the end of the line, Orphen watched as Claiomh... disappeared out of sight.

When the flow of time seemed to return to normal, Orphen pulled himself upright and saw Claiomh collapsed on the ground nearby. Philietta had apparently kicked her out of the way.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

Orphen kept his gaze on Claiomh's collapsed form as he answered, "Yeah. Thanks, I owe you one."

He took the sword out of Claiomh's unnaturally cold hand. Philietta sighed and put her dagger away.

"You're a lot softer than I thought. Were you really just going to let her kill you without putting up a fight?"

"Sometimes I find myself forgetting what the best course of action is," he replied as he threw the sword all the way back up to the second floor. "I'm not a member of the Tower anymore. I used to train in combat daily, but that was a long time ago. These days, I've been living the sort of life where I don't even need anti-personnel combat skills anymore, so of course I've grown a bit dull

compared to how I used to be. Maybe the Krylancelo of five years ago could've won with one hand tied behind his back, but these days, I really am just a nameless moneylender."

The sword that Orphen had thrown away made a metallic ringing noise as it bounced down the upstairs corridor away from them. Orphen grinned at the noise. "There's the closing bell. This round's over. Oh yeah, and Philietta?"

"What is it?"

"I've figured out how Sammy's been doing it."

"You have?"

Orphen picked Claiomh up off the ground and held her upright with one hand while he lightly tapped around her stomach with his free hand. When he found the spot he was looking for, he curled his hand up into a fist.

"This should be the spot."

Orphen wound up his arm and threw an incredibly strong punch.

"———!"

Claiomh screamed wordlessly as the pain completely winded her. Her body that had been completely limp until then suddenly doubled over as she fell out of Orphen's grasp and landed on the floor coughing as she tried to catch her breath.

She rolled around on the floor, taking deep breaths like she was suffocating. Orphen looked on as a cold sweat ran down the back of his neck. He *might* have put a bit too much force into that.

Either way, his theory had been proven correct. The black mist had come pouring out of Claiomh's mouth with every cough — the very same mist darker than darkness itself that had seemed to make up Sammy's ethereal form. Unable to keep its form, the mist dissipated into the surrounding air. It almost seemed to be running away as it was carried off down the corridor by the air currents. More likely, it was returning to the host that had generated it in the first place.

Claiomh finally stopped coughing as the last of the mist escaped her body, but

she now lay on her back on the ground, perfectly still. Orphen leaned over her, slightly worried.

“Hey, Claiomh... You alright?”

“What did you do *that* for?!” screamed Claiomh as she slapped Orphen across the face with all of her strength.

The attack had been so sudden that it sent Orphen reeling several paces backwards.

“Ow!” he yelped in pain. He had no way of knowing this, but his dumb little yelp and the way he was holding his face made him look exactly like Stark when Claiomh had kicked the assassin in the face just earlier that same day.

“You crazy bitch!” yelled Orphen. “Is that any way to treat the guy who saved your life?!”

“*Saved* my life?! You almost ended it! I saw my dad waving to me in the afterlife for a second there!”

“Okay, now just hear me out —”

Alas, Claiomh was far too enraged to lend an ear to anything Orphen had to say.

“What sane person punches a girl in the stomach with all of his strength, anyway?! You’re a trained fighter! I’m just a regular girl! If I’d died, that would’ve made *you* a murderer!”

Orphen tried weakly to protest with a little, “Okay, but I was only —” but Claiomh was having none of it.

“Don’t you have *any* common sense?! That’s definitely gonna leave a bruise!”

“Okay, but if I hadn’t hit you —”

“I bruise like a peach, you know! It’s gonna take *weeks* for that mark to go away! One time, I fell down the stairs and bruised my forehead so bad that the bruise didn’t go away for six whole months! I seriously thought about becoming a nun just so that I could hide the mark under a headdress or something!”

“Would you just —”

“I *still* have the scar from where I had my appendix removed, too! It’s hard for me to cut my nails properly because I’m always worried about hurting my fingers! And now because of you, I —”

“Oh, *shut up!*” Orphen yelled as his patience ran out. He swept Claiomh’s legs and knocked her off her feet mercilessly. The poor girl fell back to the ground, powerless to defend herself.

“*Like I was trying to say*, I hit you in the diaphragm! I shouldn’t have to explain this, but that’s the muscle you use for *breathing*. If I’d hit you in the stomach or the uterus then you’d be vomiting blood right about now. So yes, *princess*, I *was* holding back.”



“Wait...”

Philietta joined the conversation, confused about what was going on.

“How did *that* bring her back to her senses?”

“Oh right, I was in the middle of explaining,” said Orphen as he combed his hair back out of his eyes. “I realized it when Claiomh came charging at me with the sword. While it’s true that I’ve forgotten a lot of my old moves, the reason I didn’t attack Claiomh was because it seemed weird to me that *she wasn’t breathing.*”

Orphen looked down at Claiomh and shrugged his shoulders before continuing his explanation.

“When I realized that, it sort of... threw off my timing. But that’s because it helped me remember that Sammy tried yesterday to possess me in exactly the same way. I recalled how my vision had become blurry and I couldn’t breathe, and that’s when it hit me. Sammy possesses people by invading their body through the lungs, which allows him to travel through the bloodstream and into the brain. Sammy isn’t a ghost, he’s a *gas* — a high density, non-toxic gas that can enter the bloodstream and manipulate the brain without killing or suffocating a person, so he must be made of a substance that shares a lot of properties with highly dense oxygen. That’s my hypothesis, at least.”

“Your *hypothesis*?” repeated Claiomh. Her tone of voice was laden with danger. “So you punched me because you were *guessing* that it would work?”

Orphen glared at the girl. “What was I supposed to do? Just *leave* you like that? You had a Creature in your lungs. CPR wasn’t gonna cut it. Trust me, I didn’t just punch you because I wanted to. If I had any other ideas, I would’ve tried them first.”

Claiomh sat looking at Orphen doubtfully, but then suddenly, a playful smile crossed her lips.

“I’ll forgive you as long as you promise to heal my bruise later on.”

“...What are you, a kid?”

“Wait —” said Philietta, attempting to keep Orphen’s explanation going.

“Sammy is... gas? Oxygen? Even if you’ve figured that out, how do you plan to fight *the air*?”

“It’s easy. Now that I know how he’s been nullifying all our attacks, I’ve figured out his weakness, as well. It’ll be simple enough to Stab him now,” muttered Orphen before turning to face Philietta. “Phonoghoulous had figured it out, as well. That’s why he didn’t stop at Sammy, but even turned himself — or his son, or whatever the story was — into a Creature as well. It’s because Sammy was another ‘failure,’ another ‘Fool.’”

“...”

Philietta sighed deeply and turned her gaze around the rest of the room. Almost as though she was searching for something.

Orphen sighed, too.

“Anyway, let’s get out of here. I know how to beat Sammy, but it’ll take a little bit of preparation,” he explained as he helped Claiomh back to her feet and patted her on the back.

“Yeah,” agreed Claiomh, “let’s get out of here. It’s all filthy and dusty. I want some fresh air.”

“...Could you two go on ahead?”

Orphen had seen Philietta’s request coming, so it didn’t surprise him in the slightest, but Claiomh seemed a little bit surprised. He told Philietta to do whatever she wanted and laid a hand on Claiomh’s shoulder.

“Hey Claiomh, could you do me a favor?”

“...Depends on the favor,” the girl replied, trying to pull herself away from Orphen’s bloodstained hand.

Orphen pretended not to notice and continued. “I want you to go on ahead and give Majic a message.”

“You’re not coming with me?”

In response, Orphen directed Claiomh’s gaze over to Philietta.

“There’s still one more Creature left. That, uh, *ghost* from before. I can’t just

leave Philietta on her own while that thing's still wandering around, y'know?"

"..."

Claiomh glared at Orphen suspiciously.

Orphen uncomfortably averted his gaze.

"I want you to tell Majic to go get as much oil as he can and soak the mansion's foundations in it, then set the whole building on fire."

"Set it on *fire*? Why?" asked Claiomh incredulously. "If we do that while you're still inside, you'll be burned alive!"

"Don't worry, we'll be out of here before that happens," Orphen finished explaining and removed his hand from Claiomh's shoulder. He flicked her lightly in the forehead to catch her off-guard, then spun her around towards the door before she could react.

"I can pass on the message," said Claiomh before her voice took on a more dangerous tone, "but if I happen to *hear* anything from outside, then I'll be burning your escape route before anything else, got it?"

"Whatever you say," moaned Orphen, practically pushing Claiomh out of the door.

Claiomh took one step through the doorway but paused briefly to ask one last question.

"Hey, Orphen. I'm not a burden to you, am I?"

"Well... You're definitely a burden *most* of the time..." he muttered before noticing that Claiomh seemed genuinely wounded by this remark. He continued, "But that's fine. A guy like me needs dead weights like you and Majic in his life, or who knows where I'd be drifting off to right about now."

"...?"

This just seemed to confuse Claiomh, though. She looked back at Orphen, puzzled, and then decided to change her question.

"So... Can I really never learn how to use sorcery? It's really impossible for me?"

“You can’t become a Sorceress, and you shouldn’t *want* to.”

“...Why’s that?”

“Because lately I’ve found myself growing to hate Sorcerers more and more with each passing day.”

Claiomh didn’t press any further. She turned back around and trotted out the front door of the mansion while Orphen watched over her from behind.

“Selfish as ever, huh.”

“...For such a supposedly selfish girl, she certainly seemed more interested in how *you* felt on the matter,” said Philietta in teasing tones.

Orphen didn’t bother trying to correct Philietta’s misunderstanding. His ‘selfish’ remark hadn’t been directed at Claiomh, but at himself.

I’d been acting like I’d gone back to being Krylancelo the battle-borne, but all it took to snap me out of that was one look at Claiomh’s face. Before I knew it, the sight of her dragged me back into the world of the wayward moneylender I’ve grown into over the years... though that’s probably for the best, Orphen concluded.

“This the room you were looking for?” asked Orphen. He stood at the doorway of the second floor bedroom with folded arms. It was smaller than a lot of the other rooms in the vast mansion and equally as dusty, having been abandoned for almost ten years, but the layout of the room itself was actually rather comfortable. The windows had been boarded up in this room, too, but Orphen’s light spell was yet to wear out, so he could make out the interior decorating quite clearly. The bookshelves were lined with novels that must have been a nightmare to try and get a hold of this far out in the middle of nowhere, and there was a black and white framed photograph sitting on top one of the desks next to an empty vase. The bed held a large teddy bear and big, soft pillows.

“This is it. I left behind something important a long time ago,” said Philietta with a nod.

Orphen followed her into the room and asked, “So, this used to be your

room?”

“That’s right. I’m sure I left it right around... Ah, here it is.”

Philietta picked up an expensive looking diary from the desk. She brushed the dust off of it and held it close to her chest like it was her most precious possession.

Orphen’s eyes were quickly drawn to the nearby photograph instead, though. It was a photo of a tall, gentle-looking man and a nervous looking young girl. Orphen recognized the girl at a glance — It was a younger Philietta. Her physical appearance hadn’t changed too drastically over the years, but the way she carried herself now made her seem like a totally different person overall. It was probably the fact that the girl in the photo had shoulder length hair tied up in a big ribbon with a flower in it like some rich noble girl.

The man standing next to her in the photo had one hand on her shoulder and was smiling brightly. Orphen could tell at a glance who this was, too. It was Sammy as he had been in life, and he too looked almost completely different from what Orphen had seen of him until now.

“You sure you don’t wanna keep the photo?”

“...I don’t need it anymore,” Philietta brushed off Orphen’s question. She turned to look at him, her body’s outline in the dim light striking him more provocatively than usual.

She twisted her lips sarcastically and said, “Don’t you have something you wanted to ask me?”

“Not really,” Orphen shrugged. He had healed his left arm after recovering a bit of stamina. He still wasn’t back in top fighting condition, but he had recovered enough to play along with Philietta’s games again.

“I only came here to keep an eye on you,” he said. “If I left you alone, I get the feeling I’d never have seen you again.”

“...What made you think that?”

“Now that the end’s finally in sight, I thought you might be planning a double suicide with Sammy.”

Orphen's words made Philietta's cheek twitch ever so slightly.

"I wouldn't consider it for a moment. It's true that I wanted to be by Sammy's side in his final moments. That's my duty, after all. But I would've left the mansion before your friends set fire to it."

"Were you in love with him?"

"...I was."

"Even though you were only fifteen at the time?"

"That might have been exactly why."

Philietta caressed the cover of the diary and searched for a place to sit down. Eventually she settled on the dusty old bed.

"Sammy, he... He was really nice to me. From the day we met, he treated me like nobody else ever has. I was a runaway without a penny to my name, and I could've been a criminal for all he knew, but the thought never once seemed to cross his mind. This diary was a birthday present from him. Everything in this room is something he gave to me. Most of it used to belong to his younger sister, who died from an illness several years prior. I was surprised that he would give me all the mementos he had of his family, but he seemed to think that his sister would be happier if someone else got more use out of her things now that she was gone. His presents weren't only material objects, though. He taught me how to read and write, and he even practically begged Phonoghoulous to let me live here with Sammy as my legal guardian. Phonoghoulous agreed, but..."

"Sammy probably just wanted the best for you, but I doubt Phonoghoulous was thinking the same," Orphen added, clearly trying to provoke some sort of response out of Philietta.

She took the bait, but it seemed like she had planned on talking about this sooner or later either way. Her eyes filled with rage as the topic shifted to Phonoghoulous.

"Of course Phonoghoulous had other plans. He's never been the type to just look after people in need."

“I knew it. Phonoghoulous never originally planned on turning Sammy into a Creature, did he? It was supposed to be *you* that was sacrificed for the sake of his research.”

Philietta still seemed bitter about how everything had turned out. She held the diary tightly and ran her fingers over it for comfort.

“As insane as he was, even a man like Phonoghoulous wouldn’t sacrifice his own assistant without good reason. Losing his assistant would just mean a bigger workload for him, after all. Then again, I doubt he really cared that much either way. He seemed constantly afraid, constantly wary... and eventually, he just lost his mind completely. This suit, you see,” said Philietta pointing to her outfit, “was originally supposed to be my *new skin* for when I became a Creature. It was custom-made to match my proportions at fifteen years old, so it’s been a challenge staying thin enough to fit in it all these years later. The moment I learned what this suit could do, though, I knew it was my best chance... at murdering Phonoghoulous, the mad Sorcerer.”

Don’t tell me... Was Philietta the one that turned Phonoghoulous into a Creature?

The thought crept into Orphen’s head, but he decided not to ask. Instead...

“So, did he ever finish converting you into a Creature?”

Philietta laughed.

“If he had, then Sammy would still be alive. The only reason Sammy was turned into a Creature was because he offered himself up in my place at the very last second. We were all in an underground laboratory — in a different room from the one before, but similar enough overall — when Sammy demanded that his life be sacrificed instead. Phonoghoulous sighed and said something about a minor change of plans, but that was it. He let me go and performed the experiment on Sammy instead.”

Recalling the events of that fateful day, Philietta slammed her fist down on the bedsheets.

“I was powerless. I couldn’t do a thing. I went down there to visit Sammy every single day, forced to watch as he gradually lost his humanity and became

that foul *Creature*. The very last thing he said to me... was that he wanted me to kill him and put him out of his misery. That was when everything changed for me..."

Her expression turned to ice.

"That day, I became 'Philietta the Fools' Hound,' and Sammy became my first... and *only* sponsor and employer."

"You sure you had to shoulder that weight all by yourself? Seems a bit hasty to base the rest of your life around an impossible mission like that."

Philietta smirked. "Don't look down on me. I may have been a little girl, but I knew what I was doing. It might seem to you like the foolish first love of a little girl, and yes, I'll admit that that was a part of it. Over the past eight years, I've even fallen in love with other men here and there. But I couldn't just abandon Sammy to his fate like that. He saved my life. The least I could do was honor his final wish. So I tried to kill him. I tried again and again and again — to no avail. That's why I've spent these past eight years looking for a Sorcerer strong enough to help me finish the job. When I heard rumors that you had left the Tower of Fangs behind and gone rogue, I almost cried with joy. I knew that you, of all people, would be able to put an end to this horrible tragedy. I even used Ostwald's connections to track you down. You have no idea how disappointed I would've been if you had died at the hands of a man like *that*."

"I just... can't really see what drove you to such lengths," Orphen lied through his teeth. "Where is Sammy, anyway? I haven't seen him since the basement. He's still here, right?"

"He's definitely somewhere inside this mansion. He always is, and always has been. I think he's just hiding right now. We wouldn't be able to find him even if we tried. He could be pretty much anywhere in the building by now. He could even be *inside* the walls, after all."

"So why hasn't he tried to attack me yet?"

"Because you actually beat all of the other Creatures. Nobody's been able to pull off a feat like that before. He was designed with combat knowledge, so he's probably coming up with a new plan of attack after a strategic retreat. Which reminds me, why are you setting fire to the building? Will that really be enough

to kill him?”

“As long as he’s still here somewhere, that’s more than enough,” Orphen replied sharply.

He walked over to one of the boarded up windows and deftly knocked one of the planks out of place. The wood cracked and splintered as it gave way, allowing the afternoon sunlight to flood into the room.

Orphen cast his gaze downwards and saw black smoke rising up into the sky.

“Looks like it’s starting,” he said. “Oh, man. Claiomh went and rounded up Majic and Volkan to help with the job. Volkan ain’t really helping, though. What good is setting *yourself* on fire gonna do? That dumbass.”

“Is fire really Sammy’s weakness?” Philietta asked again.

Orphen answered as though he were stating the obvious. “His body is made up of gas. And not just any gas, but a gas with many of the same properties as oxygen. I dunno if you know how fire works, but it basically consumes all the oxygen in the air as fuel. Not to mention that this mansion’s got plenty of wood to burn in it. As long as Sammy is in here, the fire will consume him completely. Once he’s finished burning up, he’ll finally be laid to rest with the rest of the ashes.”

“...”

Philietta gulped at the thought of burning to death like that. Orphen turned to her and gave her an ultimatum.

“I can teleport us out of here with my sorcery. If you wanna stay behind and burn to death along with Sammy, then go right ahead. I won’t stop you. Just know that once I’ve left, I don’t plan on coming back for you.”

He had meant this to provoke Philietta the same way she had done many times until now, but the girl simply nodded in response. She didn’t say another word. For a moment, Orphen seriously thought that maybe she really did intend to die here.

“Philietta... Listen to me. Sammy died eight years ago. Even if I go along with the ridiculous idea that this thing really *is* his ghost, I’m about to kill him a

second time. There's no reason for you to stay behind and suffer the same fate."

"...I thought you weren't going to stop me? Oh, right. There was something I forgot to say to you."

"What's up?"

Philietta turned to face him.

"When you heard the truth about Sammy from Phonoghoulous, you got angry on his behalf, didn't you? I wanted to thank you for that. It made me really happy."

"...Now look here —"

Orphen balled his hand up into a fist.

"If you're serious about staying behind, then I really won't stop you. There's no medicine, no words, and definitely no spells that can cure stupidity. But if you wanna know how I feel about this —"

"Go on, then. Tell me how you feel," Philietta shot back.

Orphen paused for a moment, trying to think of how to phrase his words.

"...I want you to live," he said with a perfectly straight face.

Philietta burst out laughing at the sight of Orphen saying something as cheesy as that. Orphen, himself, felt nothing but embarrassment. He wished he could go back and stop himself from saying something so corny, but it was too late for that now.



"WAH ha ha hah!"

Volkan laughed triumphantly as the mansion burst into flames before his eyes. He stood there holding up a third flag, this time stating his truest intentions plain and clear for all to see: *'Volkan's Theater's Third Official Rally! Burn the Malicious Moneylender at the Stake, and Banish the Ghoulish Ghost to Hell With Him!'*

"Finally! At long last! I've been waiting for this moment all my life!!"

“...”

Stark was staring at Volkan, wondering just what on the Continent had happened in this boy's life to make him turn out even more black-hearted than a band of merciless assassins. Dortin, however, ignored his brother's theatrics and instead looked around between Majic and the 'theater troupe,' who were still running around throwing oil over the fires.

“Lloyd, what'd I tell you about getting too close to the fire?! Get back a little!”

Claiomh was the one directing the children in their strangely coordinated act of arson. Majic, too, was pretty dumbfounded to learn that the children were so efficient at this job. Dortin tugged on Majic's sleeve to get the boy's attention.

“What is it?”

“Umm...” Dortin began nervously. “Are you sure we should be letting those children do this...? I mean... we just asked them to help us burn somebody's house down...”

“No, we *definitely* shouldn't be letting them anywhere near the place...” Majic seemed to agree, but in words only, as he made no attempt to stop any of them.

“What do I do?” Dortin groaned. “I hate to be agreeing with my brother, but should I just let those kids burn that moneylender alive and then pin all the responsibility on them after the fact?”

“Boy, you sure can be pretty cold-hearted when you want to, huh...” Majic said as he turned to look up at the roof of the burning building. “I'm sure Master has some kind of plan... although there've been times like this before when he hasn't. Well, it's not our fault if he messes up and burns to death in there.”

“You can be plenty cruel yourself...” said Dortin.

Majic looked genuinely insulted. “I'm not being cruel. I'm being logical. Master's always telling me to leave everything to him, so that's what I'm doing. I'm being flexible and leaving everything in his hands this time. Including all the responsibility.”

“Is that how it is...” Dortin asked, clearly suspicious of the boy.

Before Majic could defend himself any further, someone behind them started screaming. It was unmistakably Volkan’s voice.

“Uwaaaahh!!”

When they turned around to see what had happened, they caught sight of the children pouring oil all over Volkan’s back as revenge for him beating them up just a short while ago. A spark had jumped from the fire and ignited Volkan like a bonfire.

“Oh, a human torch,” said Majic.

“A human torch,” agreed Dortin.

Volkan was the very picture of a tanuki that had been chased out of its hiding place by a wildfire. He tried in vain to escape the flames, but they had already begun to consume his entire body.

Claiomh did a heel turn when she caught on to the commotion.

“Oh, no! Kauffman, quick! Bring me a bucket of water!”

“Yes, boss!”

“Upsy-daisy! Ack! That wasn’t water, it was *oil*!”

Volkan practically exploded like a human firework after being further doused with oil. Stark watched the sight and kept rubbing his eyes, no doubt wondering what the heck was going on with these lunatics. He made his way over to Majic and Dortin who, for all intents and purposes, seemed to be the only people of sane mind present on the scene.

“So, my job here is done, right? I’ll be going now, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Y-Yeah...” said Majic dumbly. “Actually, why did you decide to help us out in the first place?”

“...” Stark paused to think for a moment. “No reason,” he said as his gaze wandered over to Claiomh.

In that moment, Majic pieced everything together.

“Umm... I really wouldn’t recommend that. Claiomh is... she’s not like other

girls. Trust me, she's a magnet for trouble, and you do *not* want to get yourself caught up in that."

"Th-That's not it! I'm almost thirty, you know! There's no way I'd be attracted to a little girl like her!" the assassin yelled at the top of his voice, losing his composure completely. Dortin couldn't believe what he was seeing. This guy was completely smitten with Claiomh.

The dwarf boy turned to bid the assassin farewell.

"It was nice meeting you, Mister Neykid person."

"That's 'The Gray Silhouette' to you, kid."

"That's right," said Majic. "He might be a second-rate assassin with no real skills or defining traits, but he's still got an image to maintain."

"I was only saying goodbye..." said Dortin fearfully. He turned to make sure the assassin hadn't lost his temper, but the man seemed to have long given up on getting any respect out of these people. He simply sighed heavily and turned his back on the burning mansion, walking off into the distance.

"I just had a thought..." said Majic. "Maybe that guy only became an assassin so that people would start giving him the respect he thought he deserved."

I don't think anyone would become an assassin for such a petty reason, thought Dortin.

The dwarf boy looked on as Stark Neykid left the scene. His departing figure was accompanied by the sounds of the mansion beginning to collapse under its own weight and Volkan's screams as he ran around like a grounded shooting star.



The man no longer had any of the senses he had once had in life.

Because of this, he felt no pain. He didn't even really understand what was happening to him.

The only thing that he knew for sure was that he could feel himself fading slowly away. The flames mercilessly devoured every last fiber of his being.

What was to become of his body? He had no way of knowing.

All he truly understood was that his 'life' was coming to an end. What would be left after he lost everything else? Was it possible that once the flames robbed him of everything else, he might finally find some answers? Would he finally remember who 'he' was? What was to become of what was left of him? It seemed unreasonable to assume that he would just vanish without a trace.

The flames consumed the majority of 'him' over the course of an hour, but when they had burned out completely, 'his' consciousness still lingered.

...

"Man, this has been one hell of a day."

'He' could hear someone talking nearby. It was a familiar voice. One that 'he' had been hearing a lot of lately. One that 'he' had driven fear into countless times. Or so 'he' felt, at least. 'He' couldn't seem to recall why 'he' felt like that, for some reason. Who was it? Was it Phonoghoulous? Just how many of that despicable man were there in the world?

"I still want to thank you for all you've done, Orphen."

A second voice. This one seemed familiar, too. Unlike the first voice, though, this one filled 'him' with a profound feeling of sadness and longing.

"I don't need your thanks."

"Oh, don't be like that. Still... I never expected the building to burn down so cleanly."

"It was old and in disrepair. This is pretty much what I thought would happen... Hmm?"

"...What is it?"

"Look, over there."

"..."

The second person stood there speechless.

"Looks like there's still a little part of you left, eh, Sammy?"

"But... it's just a fragment of him."

“We can’t leave him be. He could start regenerating at any minute... But there’s nothing left to burn. What do we do?”

“...I have an idea.”

“Huh? Philietta?!”

The woman reached behind her back and skillfully undid the zip on her bodysuit, pulling it down below her shoulders as she looked up at the fragment of black mist floating aimlessly around in the air. She embraced the ball of mist close to her chest and picked up a red hot length of iron from the ground at her feet. Without a moment’s hesitation, she pressed the piping hot end of the rod against her chest — pressing the black ball of mist into herself as her skin ignited.



“Philietta!” the man behind her yelled.

The woman didn’t turn around. ‘He’ could feel his thoughts gradually blending in together with the woman’s thoughts. ‘He’ could feel his ‘vision’ being overwritten with hers. Through ‘his’ new sight, ‘he’ watched as the metal rod seared the skin on the woman’s chest. ‘He’ could feel the sweat forming all over her body, and the pain wracking all of her nerves. It was almost enough to make her pass out.

In the midst of all of this, both ‘he’ and she thought the same thing.

I’ll never forget you...

The woman looked down at the wound on her chest as Sammy vanished into her.

“Find peace in my heart... Sammy.”

The last traces of the black mist were consumed by the fires of her heart.

Philietta turned around to find Orphen standing there dumbstruck. She shot him an invincible, but sad, smile.

“You’ll fix up the wound for me, won’t you?”

Her upper body now soaked with blood, she redid the zip on her suit and walked slowly towards him.

Epilogue

Tap... Tap... Tap...

Someone made their way lazily down the stone steps in the darkness. The place was unnaturally empty. It wasn't particularly expansive, just... hollow.

The room still reeked of burnt wood like any other did. After Phonoghoulous's mansion had been burnt to the ground, this was one of the only areas left intact. The water that had spilled out onto the ground when Orphen had broken the water tank was still mostly there, although some of it had been evaporated in the heat when Orphen had burned the building down. That, plus the fact that he had turned the room into a massive oven not long beforehand.

The floor was still littered with broken glass from when he had shattered the tank in question. In the middle of that mess, a single man's corpse lay still in the middle of the floor...

Tap... Tap...

The footsteps echoed throughout the underground chamber. A horrible stench permeated the air. The man who walked across the room held his right arm out before him.

"I call upon thee, Tiny Spirits."

In reaction to the spell, a light came to life within the man's right hand. It lit up the underground chamber and reflected its caster in the dim room. The man was in his very early twenties, as far as the light reflected him. His facial expression seemed laden with self-derision as he held a permanent twisted smirk on his lips.

"...You're still there, aren't you?"

In response to the young man...

"...You mean me, right?"

The giant fish corpse responded to him. Strangely colored blood lay all about

the room around the body, but it still seemed to be talking somehow.

“I had a feeling you weren’t gone yet, *Phonoghoulous*. I still have a few questions I need to ask you.”

The one man — Orphen — had come back to get some answers out of the man. He brushed his hair back out of his face.

“The first is about that Goddess statue in the main hall. What were you about to say about that wound you’d deliberately put on its face?”

Phonoghoulous remained silent for a long time.

“...I am a heretic and a renegade. Does my answer to that question really hold any meaning anymore?”

“It’s the kind of action and response I’d expect from a cult, not a rogue Sorcerer. Were you cursing the Gods? Was there more to it than that?”

Phonoghoulous didn’t reply. Orphen crossed his arms and continued on to the next question.

“Fine, if you’re not gonna talk, then I can’t pry it out of you at this point. My next question, then. Why did you go out of your way to make Creatures for the sole purpose of fighting against the Dragon races? We’re not at war anymore, and we haven’t been for the longest time. I doubt you’d even find any buyers for those things.”

“...That question is little different than the first. I was *afraid*... so I made weapons to protect myself. I had no other choice.”

“...What were you so afraid of?”

“I cannot say. If I told you now, then I would die. Not just physically, but spiritually, as well. I do not fear death any longer, but I refuse to play straight into *their* hands. I refuse to give up my *soul*. So, if you really want to know...” The hollow voice paused for a second, its voice echoing throughout the empty chamber. “...Then you can go see the truth for yourself. I witnessed it on the grounds of Kimluck a long, long time ago.”

“The head branch of the Church...?” inquired Orphen, but Phonoghoulous did not respond. With a heavy sigh, Orphen briefly thought about asking whether

the man he was talking with was *Kief* Phonoghoulous or *Ramone* Phonoghoulous, but he changed his mind when he realized how stupid that would make him look and asked something else instead.

“...Where’s your voice coming from?”

Indeed, the fish remained dead on its side. Upon its corpse, Orphen thought he saw the figure of a very old man sitting down. His robes covered his face almost entirely, and what little of his expression Orphen could make out made the old man look utterly terrified of *something*.

...He almost looked like *an actual ghost*.

Orphen knew how stupid that sounded, but he couldn’t help balling his hand up into a fist anyway. As soon as he blinked, the shadowy old man’s figure vanished into the darkness.

“...Guess our time’s up. See ya, Phonoghoulous.”

Orphen left only these words behind as he turned to exit the remains of the underground room.

The silent darkness was all that remained behind him. Between the broken glass, the filthy water, and the Creature’s corpse, it was questionable enough whether the *ghost* had ever been there to begin with...



“Alright, Dortin! Now’s our chance! Let’s scram!” screeched Volkan.

Dortin could only chase after his brother as the older dwarf made a mad dash down the road out of the village.

“...Will we really make it out of here so easily?” the younger boy asked incredulously.

They had slipped out of the inn the moment the Black Sorcerer had taken his eyes off of them. They had been thoroughly interrogated, whereupon Volkan had admitted to having used less-than-legal methods to come into possession of the wooden crate and snake-skin that he had used in many of their recent jobs. Volkan had recovered from the experience quicker than anyone could have expected, though. The Black Sorcerer had dislocated damned near every

joint in the dwarf boy's body, but the boy had snapped awake and literally pulled himself together not ten minutes ago, and he had one last plan to get them out of trouble.

He was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, a boy who would not die even if you killed him.

"Hey, Bro?!" Dortin yelled as he chased after his brother. Neither of them could afford to stop for breath.

"What is it?!"

"Even if we get out of here, where are we supposed to go next?!"

"That's obvious!" screeched Volkan. "We run into the sunset with hopes of a better tomorrow! For as long as I, Vulcano Volkan, draw breath, the morrow remains brighter than the day!"

"So you haven't come up with *anything*?" squealed Dortin, a boy long past daring to hope for anything remotely optimistic.

Volkan remained silent like he was about to say something, but instead of opening his mouth again, he decided (with uncharacteristic wisdom) to focus on running away instead.

"By the way!" Dortin yelled again.

"What is it *this* time?!"

"You should really...!"

"I should really...?!"

"Look straight ahead...!"

"I am...!"

"At the ground!"

"Why the ground?!"

"Because there's a rope right in front of... you..."

But Dortin's warning had come just a beat too late. Volkan had charged straight into the trap, which had apparently been set up specifically for him, as

it tripped him up and sent him crashing face-first into the ground. Dortin could only watch as his brother tumbled forwards with all the grace of an injured swan.

The poor dwarf could do nothing but curse his own misfortune.

“Tell me *before* I run into it, fool...”

“Sorry. You were running too quickly, though...” said Dortin as he drew to a halt in front of the rope trap.

“...Who dares to plant a trap like this in waiting before the mighty Vulcano Volkan...?! I’ll rip dried shiitake mushrooms out of their heads until their brain withers away from fungus rot!”

Volkan rose to his feet and grabbed hold of one end of the rope, while the other looked like it was tied around the roots of a nearby tree. Just then, a human stepped out of the shadows.

“Huhuhuhuhuhuhuhuhuhu.”

“Y-You malevolent moneylender!” Volkan screeched accusingly at Orphen, who flashed a characteristically wicked smile.

“I had a feeling you’d try something *stupid* like this,” he said.

“Shit! See, Dortin?! This is exactly why I told you it wouldn’t work!!”

“No, that’s what *I* told *you*...” Dortin sighed with narrowed eyes, but nobody seemed to be listening to anything he had to say.

Orphen crossed his arms, and a sinister look adorned his face.

“Alright, brat, this has gone on *long enough*! No more mister nice guy! You can’t escape from me now, and your debt has accumulated a *lot* of interest! You’re gonna pay me back *every last penny* even if I have to shake you by the ankles daily for it!”

“And when, exactly, have you ever been a *nice guy*?” Dortin protested weakly.

Volkan agreed with the younger dwarf’s accusation. “That’s right! I’ll sue you for false advertising, bastard!”

“Go right ahead,” said Orphen with a grin. This intimidated Volkan

tremendously.

“...Can’t we pay it back with our bodies?” asked Dortin.

“Sure. I suppose I could make a pretty penny if I flipped the both of you off to a local black market butcher,” said Orphen, who did not appear to be joking.

Even Volkan could tell that there was no talking his way out of this one.

Just then, a woman in a black bodysuit came jogging down the road. Orphen noticed her approaching, too, and turned away from the dwarfs to face her.

“You shouldn’t tease them so much,” the woman said with a playful wink.

Volkan immediately made to get in his savior’s good graces.

“My Goddess!” he yelled as he leaped towards her chest. She instinctively kicked him out of the air and back onto the ground. She had to put her hand to her lips just to stifle her laughter. With her free hand, she held out a bag of coins in front of Orphen, audibly clinking to show just how much money she had on her.

“I’ve been looking for you so I could give you this. You’ve been avoiding me since last night, haven’t you?”

“What’s with the cash, Philietta?” asked Orphen, both hands on his hips.

Philietta shrugged her shoulders. “It’s your reward for helping me out with my request.”

“Wow...”

Volkan was stunned by the sheer amount of money that must be in that bag of coins. He had likely never seen such a hefty amount before in his entire life. And unlike Sockets (paper money) which were only accepted in certain major towns, coins had a fixed value no matter where on the Continent you went. Whether it was gold coins, or even just copper coins, it was still a hefty amount either way, Dortin realized.

...A moneylender, of all people, should have been well aware of this fact, too. But for some reason, he hesitated slightly before outright refusing to accept the sizable sum.

“I can’t accept that.”

“...Huh?”

“You *what?!* ” screeched Volkan. He may have been overreacting, but on the other hand, any other onlooker might have reacted the same.

“You’ve been chasing us around *non-stop* demanding that we pay you back, but you won’t even accept a proper reward from this nice lady?! I’ll wake you up early with a cuckoo clock and kill you to death by sleep deprivation, you bastard!”

Volkan took a swing at Orphen, but he was sent flying to the ground for his trouble. Philietta watched on as the two continued bickering with each other.

“Why won’t you accept it? This isn’t even money I got illegally. It’s all of the savings I brought with me when I ran away from home.”

“...I’m pretty sure that’s still illegal,” Dortin chimed in, but Philietta ignored the boy. She simply stared Orphen down doubtfully.

“I don’t care who you stole the money from.”

“Then why won’t you take it?”

“...Because I don’t work for you. I refuse to accept money for a *job* like that. If I took that money right now, then I’d run the risk of having you track me down for *another* pain in the ass job later on down the line.”

While Orphen was explaining himself...

“Now’s my chance, Dortin! Run for it!”

Volkan whipped his blunt sword out and whacked Orphen’s shins with all of his might.

“Augh!” Orphen screamed in pain as he buckled at the knees.

“Run for it!”

Dortin had no choice but to chase after his brother as he continued running down the road.

“...Lately, it feels like we’re only still alive because we keep lucking out,” the younger brother commented dryly.

Dortin fell to the ground a ways behind his brother. The moneylender had grabbed him by the ankle and pulled him to the ground, as well. The much taller man rose back to his feet as he let out an evil chuckle.

“...And I’m *always* the only one who gets caught,” the boy added.

“Giiive! Meee! Myyy! Moooneeey!!”

“If I get PTSD from this, then it will be your fault!”

“...Are you *sure* you don’t want the reward?” asked Philietta dubiously. Orphen, ever the tragic hero, could just barely restrain himself from taking the woman up on her offer.

“...It’s more fun this way,” he said plainly.

“...Maybe for *you*,” said Dortin.

Philietta burst out laughing.

“I knew it. You really *are* an incredible guy. Too proud and stubborn to take payment for a job well done. How about this, then? I’ll work for you until I’ve paid off my debt.”

“Thanks for the offer, but no thanks. I already have plenty of companions I can rely on,” said Orphen, pointing just a short way down the road where Volkan had run away to.

“...Hmm?”

When Philietta followed his gaze, she saw that Volkan had tripped over another rope in the exact same magnificent fashion as he had the first. This time, the one who stepped out of the shadows was a slim young girl with blonde hair. She seemed more alive now than she ever had before, revived completely following the events of the previous night. She even spoke in the same tone of voice as Orphen had moments prior.

“I had a feeling you’d try something *stupid* like this!” she yelled. “Majic! Get the net ready!”

“Sure, whatever,” the boy said, stepping out from behind the tree on the other side of the road. He threw out a net over Volkan and captured the boy before he had a chance to rise to his feet and escape a second time.

“Curses!” cursed Volkan. He had actually used much more... *colorful* language than this, but it wasn’t the sort of thing that anyone could pass on without blushing themselves.

“They’re just the worst, aren’t they?” said Orphen. “You gotta love ‘em.”

Dortin had no idea what the moneylender was talking about, and Philietta seemed equally as confused. But she knew that, if nothing else, she had been thoroughly defeated. There was no way she could convince Orphen to take the money after being shown such splendid — and clearly unrehearsed — teamwork as that.

Dortin thought it was a darned shame. That much money would have done a significant way towards paying off his brother’s debt. All he could do was turn his gaze to the sky, watching as the clouds floated lazily by. The village had grown peaceful once more, with but a single new ghost story going around among the villagers...

Afterword

“Hoorah! The end of the book finally arrived! It is I, Philietta! Coming to you live with a progress report!”

“And I’m here too... The author, forever suffering at the hands of his insert characters.”

“(Ignoring) Hey, you know just a couple weeks after you wrote the last afterword, Gracie lost it all at the JFDA Ultimate! Isn’t that terrible?”

“The true story is actually unknown to the public, you know... But I’m hoping that my afterword won’t cause any more disastrous sports failures. It’s just a superstition!”

“You know, if you keep mentioning stuff like this, people are gonna assume you’re a sports maniac!”

“Hey now, don’t misunderstand here... Sometimes I simply have no choice but to talk about athletes using fake names; you know how it is. I’m an author. That’s how stuff like this goes.”

“You know you’re writing all this yourself, right? Even my lines.”

“Like I said, I’m an author. You wouldn’t understand. If I talk too much about my book in the afterword, then we’ll end up getting into spoiler territory. You want that, do you?!”

“The way I see it, an afterword can go one of three ways. It could be some spoilers for what’s coming next, it could be a little anecdote by the author, or it could be a surreal one-man performance.”

“I’ll take option three, please.”

“Alright, fine. Do you have any special moves?”

“As a matter of fact, I’m versed in the Secret Gate Praying Mantis Form!”

“Gotta say, Boss, you’re really nailing the surreal aspect of this one-man performance... I wonder if you’re as strong as martial artists in the movies.”

“I’d like to think I am. I’m pretty damn tough, you know? Form is everything in martial arts.”

“...How about we just focus on the afterword, though?”

“...Yeah, alright. Let’s talk about the next volume.”

“Oh, you’re actually gonna do it? I’m a little surprised, but not in a bad way.”

“Huh?”

“Actually, I’m curious. Who are the strongest characters you can think of?”

“Hmm... That’s a good question, I guess I’d have to go with the world boxing champ.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. But in this case, shouldn’t your protagonist be the strongest character in your work?”

“Ehh... Maybe? I guess he’s closer to a welterweight champion.”

“You can’t just classify fighters in terms of power levels like that, you’ll make the real pros mad.”

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with it. Anyway, in terms of characters, there are different tiers to what constitutes the strongest, or a genius.”

“Huh?”

“Well if the protagonist is a ‘genius,’ then he’s usually a prodigal student, right? Top of his class. But if it’s something like a master or teacher who’s a ‘genius,’ then he’s probably world-class and in a league of his own entirely.”

“Well... I guess that’s a reasonable idea, but where are you going with this?”

“What do you mean?”

“...I just wonder where you’re going with this, as the author. This whole long-winded thing about power or whatever.”

“I mean, nowhere. That’s just what an author is supposed to do.”

“I see... So it’s one of those sad situations where a salaryman gets drunk on the commute train in the morning, he gets off at the wrong stop, he stumbles and cries. He can’t do anything, he’s late for work.”

“Stop, you’ll make me cry... What a tragic tale.”

“It’s okay. We live in a fragile world with fragile people.”

“I’ve never been late in my life, actually. Unless you count five minutes late as late.”

“Geez. If you keep doing that, you’ll get fired, you know.”

“I don’t really mind getting fired, honestly.”

“What the hell kind of employee are you?”

“Well, either way. I hope you readers support me going forwards. It was nice to talk to you.”

“Wow, you finally decided to end this long-winded, meandering nonsense.”

“(Ignoring) So, once again. Thank you!”

“Goodbye!”

— Akita Yoshinobu



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